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**THESIS**

**ASSESSING VICTORY: HOW TO IDENTIFY THE  
CORRECT MEASURES OF SUCCESS IN  
COUNTERINSURGENCY WARFARE—THE CASE OF  
THE FARC IN COLOMBIA**

by

Alexander B. Korn

September 2013

Thesis Advisor:

Douglas Porch

Second Reader:

Kalev I. Sepp

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This thesis applies net assessment to the Colombian Government's protracted campaign against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in order to determine proper metrics to track progress in counterinsurgency warfare. Net assessment is used to analyze potential centers of gravity to determine the correct center of gravity. Armed with the correct center of gravity, potential critical vulnerabilities are examined. Finally, once the correct critical vulnerability is identified, metrics are assessed, in order to determine which metrics accurately track progress in attacking the identified center of gravity.

As debate exists as to the true nature of the FARC, this thesis applies the above methodology to the FARC as both an ideological insurgent group and a narco-criminal organization, and identifies different centers of gravity, critical vulnerabilities and metrics in each case.

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MEASURES OF SUCCESS IN COUNTERINSURGENCY  
WARFARE—THE CASE OF THE FARC IN COLOMBIA**

Alexander B. Korn  
Lieutenant Commander, United States Navy  
B.S., United States Naval Academy, 1999

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September 2013**

Author: Alexander B. Korn

Approved by: Dr. Douglas Porch  
Thesis Advisor

Dr. Kalev I. Sepp  
Second Reader

Dr. Mohammed Hafez  
Chair, Department of National Security Affairs

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

AUC	United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia
DSE	Democratic Army of Greece
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional
ENC	Colombian Army
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FARC-EP	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army
GNA	Greek National Army
OAS	Organization of American States
PCC	Colombian Communist Party
PN	National Police
U.S.	United States

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This thesis applies net assessment to the Colombian Government's protracted campaign against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) in order to determine proper metrics to track progress in counterinsurgency warfare. This thesis applies the above methodology to the FARC-EP as both an ideological insurgent group and a narco-criminal organization, using the FARC-EP to provide two distinct case studies.

In each case study, potential centers of gravity are examined, and one is identified as the true center of gravity. Next, the center of gravity is assessed for critical vulnerabilities, and one critical vulnerability is selected. Finally, net assessment is used to determine which metrics offer an accurate indication of progress, and which metrics are misleading or independent of the desired results.

In the case of the FARC-EP as an ideological group, potential centers of gravity are leadership, alliances and popular support. Leadership is eliminated as a center of gravity after reviewing the success the Colombian Government has had in eliminating FARC-EP leadership, with little noticeable impact. Indeed, the greatest impact was following the death of Jacobo Arenas, of natural causes. His death opened the way for greater FARC-EP involvement in the narcotics trade, strengthening them in some regards, especially financial. Next, alliances were ruled out, as the FARC-EP has received little outside support, has weathered the collapse of the Soviet Union, and has outlasted potential domestic allies, with little loss of strength. Finally, popular opinion is determined to be the FARC-EP's center of gravity. Popular opinion includes both genuine support by Colombians who agree with FARC-EP's goals or benefit from the insurgents, such as coca cultivators who receive protection, as well as coerced support from civilians who may prefer the Colombian Government to the insurgents, but will not act on their preference due to fear of guerrilla retribution.

If the FARC-EP's center of gravity is popular support, then territorial control is its critical vulnerability. It needs to exercise territorial control to maintain both consensual

and coerced popular support. Territorial control does not indicate trench lines or clearly defined sectors on a map, but rather the ability for one side to exert its will while simultaneously denying its opponent the ability to do so. This suggests several metrics, such as body counts, that offer a dubious picture of the conflict. Rather, the willingness of the *campesinos* to work with the Colombian Government and not with the FARC-EP should be measured, using metrics, such as intelligence tips received and low-level FARC-EP defections. Additionally, the degree to which the government has territorial control can be judged by the nature of its presence—neighborhood police foot patrols indicating a high level of government control, heavily armored mechanized convoys indicating a strong guerilla presence.

Assessing the FARC-EP as a narco-criminal organization offers different possible centers of gravity, including drug production, drug distribution, money laundering, and personnel. Net assessment demonstrates that production, specifically the production of coca leaves, is the center of gravity of the FARC-EP as a criminal organization. Examining coca production offers two possible critical vulnerabilities, crop eradication and crop substitution. For a number of reasons, crop eradication has been the preferred method, as measured by resources committed and press releases issued. However, eradication is ineffective and often counterproductive; as *campesinos* see their livelihoods destroyed by the government, and are consequently driven to illegal organizations for protection. Crop substitution thus appears to be the correct critical vulnerability, but in fact the desired end state is to offer better economic alternatives to coca cultivation, whether that is legal crops, factory work, or any other form of legal employment. This suggests economic development as the path to reduce the cocaine production of Colombia, and metrics to track economic development as the long term solution. In the short term, rising retail drug prices in the end markets partially reflect the effectiveness of counterdrug efforts.

Net assessment applied to the FARC-EP reveals that they remain an ideological movement despite their increased narcotics activities. Further, net assessment shows that the Colombian Government, with American assistance, has made great strides in combating the FARC-EP. Colombian military pressure has forced the insurgents to the peace table; the Colombian Government must use net assessment to finish demobilizing the FARC-EP and achieve a lasting peace.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. WHAT IS NET ASSESSMENT?

While net assessment may appear to be a relatively new term dating from the 1980s, the concept is as ancient as war itself. At its most basic, net assessment is a calculation of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats that guides analysis of the assessor's national forces and those of a perceived rival nation. The classical Chinese scholar Sun Tzu, in his study *The Art of War*, recognized the importance of net assessment: "Therefore, appraise it [war] in terms of the five fundamental factors ... so you may assess its essentials."<sup>1</sup> Marcus Porcius Cato, Cato the Elder, famously ended his speeches with the phrase "Moreover, I advise that Carthage should be destroyed" as he net assessed that Carthage's economic resources would in time allow it to conquer Rome, and so suggested a political goal—the destruction of Carthage—to keep that from happening.<sup>2</sup> The strategy—creating an army and a fleet and maneuvering it to North Africa to defeat Carthaginian forces—took some generations to accomplish. In similar fashion, United States (U.S.) Navy planners during the 1930s assessed their fleet superior to the Japanese fleet on the basis of merely counting hulls, without regards to factors, such as training, doctrine, technology, but most importantly, the potential interaction between the two fleets.<sup>3</sup>

Proper net assessment focuses on the potential interaction of two opposing forces in the form of opportunities and threats, not merely on the strengths and weaknesses of the forces individually. In the case of the U.S. Navy's assessment prior to World War II, simple numbers appeared to give the advantage to the Americans. Not only did the Washington and London Naval Treaties give the Americans a 5:3 advantage in capital ship and cruiser tonnage, but also, American planners believed that many U.S. warships

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<sup>1</sup> The five fundamentals according to Sun Tzu are moral influence, weather, terrain, command, and doctrine. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, ed. and trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Miles, *Carthage Must Be Destroyed: The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Civilization* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Peter Rosen, "Net Assessment as an Analytical Concept," in *On Not Confusing Ourselves* eds. Andrew W. Marshall, J. J. Martin, and Henry S. Rowen (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 288.

were superior to their Japanese counterparts. The Americans argued that because daytime surface actions would be the norm, battles would be decided by long-range gunnery. This caused American planners to ignore or underrate the Japanese Long Lance torpedo and their corresponding night combat doctrine. After suffering heavy losses in at Guadalcanal from 1942–1943 to Japanese night torpedo attacks, U.S. Navy surface planners saw the rapid-fire 8-inch gun, still optimized for daytime combat at extreme ranges, as the answer.<sup>4</sup> In theory, the firepower packed by American heavy cruisers and the weight of iron they could throw was impressive. In reality, short-range night combat was more common off Guadalcanal, and the Japanese torpedoes offered them a critical tactical advantage.<sup>5</sup> Incorrect net assessment proved costly to the U.S. Navy.

Net assessment in the form of reassessment does not end when the shooting starts, but rather as the Guadalcanal example illustrates, it is vital during hostilities, as it dictates whether existing operational and tactical approaches are contributing to the success of the strategy or if they must be adjusted, and on which level—tactical, operational, strategic or in the contours of policy. The British used strategic assessment during the First World War to measure their progress in the First Battle of the Atlantic, and drastically changed strategies as a result of this assessment.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of the war, naval doctrine envisaged the use of submarines as part of main fleet action. Acting as a screen in the vanguard of fleets, they would attrite opposing warships, thereby reducing the firepower of enemy fleets in advance of main fleet actions. However, main fleet actions were rare in the North Atlantic, and submarines too slow to maneuver effectively in advance of more rapid surface ships, so that the British were able to secure their major warships at Scapa Flow, an anchorage protected from U-boat attack. Denied warship targets, the U-boats commenced commerce warfare against British shipping. At first, they operated in accordance with prize rules, but the emergence of armed merchant vessels in the form of Q-ships made it too dangerous for U-boats to surface and take prizes. Unrestricted

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<sup>4</sup> James D. Hornfischer, *Neptune's Inferno: The U.S. Navy at Guadalcanal* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), 392.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Friedman, *U.S. Cruisers: An Illustrated Design History* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 324.

<sup>6</sup> Scott Sigmund Gartner, *Strategic Assessment in War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 63.

submarine warfare, the sinking of merchant ships without warning, ensued from February to August 1915, when American pressure forced the Germans to cease least they draw the United States into the war.

By 1917, the German General Staff, under pressure to win the war in advance of U.S. intervention, and criticized because Britain's naval blockade allegedly had brought the German population to the brink of starvation, concluded that they could knock Britain out of the war with an unrestricted campaign of U-boat warfare. Launched in January 1917, the U-boat campaign initially caught the Royal Navy unprepared. British shipping losses mounted rapidly, reaching 540,000 tons in February 1917, compared to 368,000 tons the previous month. As the legend goes, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George then overruled his Admiralty and instituted a convoy system, a counter to maritime raiding practiced at least as old as the Roman Empire, instantly turning the tide of the Battle of the Atlantic. In fact, losses continued to rise, setting a new monthly record in March 1917 at 593,841 tons, before peaking at 881,027 tons in April 1917. After April, shipping losses started to decrease, but remained above 1916 levels until September 1918.<sup>7</sup>

At first glance, raw monthly loss tonnage between March and September 1917 would suggest that the convoy system was a failure. The British lost more merchant ships in the 18 months after instituting the convoy system, 6,463,102 tons, than they did in the previous 18 months, 4,986,905. Using such one-dimensional analysis, however, misses the concept of net assessment, which is to take all variables into account to create an overall interpretation of the situation. Prior to the implementation of the convoy system, shipping losses were increasing. Once convoys were in place, total losses remained high for several months, but the rate of increase slowed, and then began to decrease. A positive trend in the correct metric indicated that the convoy tactics was effectively countering the German strategy to knock Britain out of the war by denying it maritime resupply and to prevent U.S. intervention by blocking Atlantic access.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gartner, *Strategic Assessment in War*, 77–78.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 82–83.

Net assessment is only effective if the correct metric is utilized. While the British civilian leaders viewed merchant tonnage lost as the most important factor, the Admiralty reached a very different conclusion. To the Royal Navy, the problem was that U-Boats were sinking merchant ships, so the solution was to sink U-Boats. At first, they approached this by dispatching hunter-killer groups of surface warships, and opposed convoys, as did the commercial shipping industry, as being too passive, slow, and expensive. Later, the Admiralty realized that convoys are actually tactically offensive in nature, as they forced U-boats to enter weapons range of the convoy's escorts. However, their ultimate support for convoys was an example of reaching the correct solution for the wrong reason. The Royal Navy continued to track U-boats destroyed, rather than ships successfully reaching harbor, as the primary metric. What ultimately mattered was how much tonnage reached Britain, and tonnage lost is useful because, not only does it impact current shipments, but it impacts future numbers as well, by reducing the overall size of the British Merchant Marine. Increased U-boat losses indicated not only improved Royal Navy anti-submarine tactics, but also an overall increase in the number of U-boats operating in the Atlantic. Tracking U-boat losses was meant to measure U-boat strength. Even had that been an interesting metric, it did not take into account German construction programs. Lloyd George was correct to track merchant losses, and specifically the rate of increase or decrease, as it more accurately reflected the Royal Navy's operational and tactical effectiveness in the U-boat war, as well as the failure of German strategy to seal off the Atlantic, eliminate or diminish Anglo-American military power, and hence isolate France.<sup>9</sup>

The British experience in the Atlantic during World War I has interesting parallels with counter-insurgency warfare. The *Guerre de course*, or commerce warfare, especially as practiced by early submarines, resembles guerilla warfare in many of its essential tactics. The submarine used stealth to defeat better-armed surface warships, and preferred to attack lightly armed merchant ships, as the guerrilla ambushes government troops and only attacks weaker forces. The Admiralty's use of U-boat sinkings as a metric is comparable to the body-count metric sometimes used in counter-insurgencies, and both

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<sup>9</sup> Gartner, *Strategic Assessment in War*, 79–80, 85–87.

share the inherent problems of accurately measuring casualties inflicted on a force one cannot see. The same net assessment process that helped the British fight a World War can be used in counter-insurgency.

## B. DEFINITIONS

This section will explain terms found throughout this thesis.

### 1. Victory

Victory in counter-insurgency almost certainly does not mean a World War II style surrender ceremony onboard the USS *Missouri*. Defeated insurgencies do not necessarily end, but rather, may fade away. Once it becomes clear that the insurgents are losing, many lukewarm supporters abandon the cause. Hardcore insurgents may not or cannot surrender, for reasons of ideology or fear of punishment. The Malayan Emergency offers an example of an “Emergency” officially declared over in 1960. Yet the Communist Party of Malaya leadership remained hiding in the jungles of Thailand until 1989.<sup>10</sup> Using this example, victory in counter-insurgency may be said to occur when the insurgents are contained and no longer pose an existential threat to the state.

### 2. Center of Gravity

Clausewitz defines a center of gravity as “the source of all power and movement upon which everything depends.”<sup>11</sup> Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, draws on Clausewitz to define “center of gravity” as:

The source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> R. W. Komer, *The Malayan Emergency in Retrospect: Organization of a Successful Counterinsurgency Effort* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1972), 20–21.

<sup>11</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 595.

<sup>12</sup> Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1-02 Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, April 2006, 44.

A more concise rephrasing of this is “a system’s source of power to act.”<sup>13</sup> Debate over what constitutes a center of gravity lies at the heart of strategy making. This thesis will use Clausewitz’s definition of a center of gravity.

### **3. Critical Vulnerability**

Joint Publication 1–02 defines “critical vulnerability” as:

An aspect of a critical requirement which is deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack that will create decisive or significant effects.<sup>14</sup>

From this definition, critical vulnerabilities are elements, like economic resources, personnel, and logistics, whose degradation will significantly impact an organization’s ability to fight. The benefit of destroying either a physical or intangible aspect of an organization must be weighed against the effort expended.

### **4. Insurgency**

Joint Publication 1–02 defines “insurgency” as:

The organized use of subversion and violence by a group or movement that seeks to overthrow or force change of a governing authority. Insurgency can also refer to the group itself.<sup>15</sup>

Insurgency is therefore a strategic process, one that combines all elements of struggle including political and economic. Guerrilla warfare, sometimes called partisan warfare, is an operational or tactical process carried out by irregular, usually but not exclusively indigenous, forces that relies on concealment, ambush, surprise, and even terror tactics to fight at an advantage against a conventionally superior armed force.

## **C. METHODOLOGY**

Some may argue that net assessment is more difficult in counter-insurgency than in conventional warfare. Whereas progress in conventional warfare can be measured by tracking the territory and objectives seized, only in the final stages of a successful

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<sup>13</sup> Dale C. Eikmier, “Centers of Gravity Analysis,” *Military Review* 84, no. 4 (July/August 2004): 2.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1-02, 81.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 161.

insurgency might a guerilla army attempt to take a country's capital, for instance. On the other hand, progress in any war of attrition—conventional or insurgent—is difficult to assess. To take World War I as an example, peripheral objectives and secondary allies came and went, and were interpreted as predictors of ultimate success or failure. But the outcome of the war depended ultimately on the popular and soldierly morale, economic staying power, and political will of the major adversaries, all notoriously difficult to assess. This did not become apparent until the final collapse of German morale and hence political will to fight in the summer of 1918. In order to assess progress against an insurgent movement with any degree of accuracy, a net assessment must be conducted early and often. As a guide to net assessment, it may be tempting to draw linear parallels between conflicts as that allow operational and tactical methods that proved successful in the past to be reapplied elsewhere. However, no two cases are alike. American doctrine in Vietnam was influenced by previous experience in Greece and Korea, with less successful results.<sup>16</sup>

While each insurgency must be treated as a unique case, the net assessment that must be conducted follows a set process. Such an assessment must first determine the nature of the insurgency, as that will dictate its centers of gravity. An insurgency may have a rural or urban focus, or it may enjoy broad popular support or have a limited vanguard elite, or it may draw support from a specific ethnic or religious faction. Since a center of gravity is something that if destroyed will lead to the defeat of the insurgency, the challenge of net assessment is to figure out the nature of the insurgency, as this will dictate the strategy. For its part, the insurgency may obfuscate its true nature, to confuse or distort the net assessment and hence misdirect the counter-insurgent. Ideally, further analysis will narrow down possible choices and reveal the one true center of gravity. Clausewitz links the center of gravity to the character of the adversary:

For Alexander, Gustavus Adolphus, Charles XII, and Fredrick the Great, the center of gravity was their army. If their army had been destroyed, they would have gone down in history as failures. In countries subject to

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<sup>16</sup> Larry E. Cable, *Conflict of Myths* (New York: New York University, 1986), 141. (Questions surrounding the veracity of Dr. Cable military record and personal history do not invalidate the quality of his scholarly writings. *Conflict of Myths* has received numerous positive scholastic reviews despite the possible shortcomings of its author.)

domestic strife, the center of gravity is generally the capital. In small countries that rely on large ones, it is usually the army of their protector. Among alliances, it lies in the community of interests, and in popular uprisings it is in the personalities of the leaders and public opinion.<sup>17</sup>

Clausewitz's assessment may not prove true in all insurgencies, yet it proves a useful starting point in determining the center of gravity for a given case.

The net assessment must then analyze critical vulnerabilities. Factors to be considered when determining critical vulnerabilities include the ability to locate relevant targets and then neutralize them, the impact of its loss on the insurgent, the insurgent's ability to replace losses, and the total number of targets to be neutralized in that category. While an insurgency may have two hundred fronts and only one charismatic leader, it may be easier to locate the fronts than one well-hidden individual. It may seem quicker to conduct search and destroy sweeps through the jungle than conduct long-term civil affair programs. However, which course of action offers a better return on investment? Having determined the correct center of gravity, the relevant critical vulnerabilities must be attacked.

Once the correct critical vulnerabilities have been identified, the proper metrics must be applied. What is to be measured is the impact on the center of gravity. Metrics must be reliably measured, they must be assessed in context, they must be viewed over a period of time, and they must address the desired end result, not some intermediate factor. U-boat losses were the wrong metric as the objective was getting supplies to Britain, not reducing the size of Germany's submarine fleet. Furthermore, accurately measuring U-boats destroyed was problematic, as a standard submarine tactic was to simulate destruction by releasing oil and debris, or submarines often sank with all hands, leaving little evidence of their demise—so naval officers might count the U-boats that escaped through subterfuge as kills, while those destroyed might pass unnoticed. Additionally, the number of U-boats sunk was largely dependent on the level of U-boat activity, and increasing sinkings could be a result of increased U-Boat presence, not more effective strategies. Clausewitz's “friction” is always a factor, and random chance can result in false indices in the short term. One attack or accident may double the monthly

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<sup>17</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 596.

casualty figure, but that does not indicate the need for a tactical or operational adjustment so long as the strategy is robust. Finally, there is the “Battle of the Bulge” syndrome, in which a desperate last grasp at victory may wrongly be interpreted as a sign of enemy strength.<sup>18</sup> Net assessment must be constant, but assessors must take a long-term approach to interpreting data. Trends are often more important than raw data. If an unfavorable metric is decreasing, even if it remains high, then the current strategy is probably effective.

#### D. APPLICATION

This thesis will apply the above methodology to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC-EP) to demonstrate the application of net assessment. While the conclusions will be unique to Colombia, the process is applicable to any insurgency, or even to conventional military conflicts. This process will be split into two chapters, based on the differing interpretations of the nature of the FARC-EP as alternatively an ideologically inspired insurgency or a narco-terrorist cartel. Since the FARC-EP has elements of both, the Colombian government must devise strategies that address both aspects. If the government identifies the FARC-EP as only one of the above categorizations, then defeating the FARC-EP may merely attack that aspect and leave its other dimension intact. Alternatively, the same strategy may be effective to defeat both aspects, but a net assessment must be conducted to determine the correct course of action. The two aspects cannot be completely separated, as drugs and other illicit activities fund the FARC-EP’ campaign of subversion and so furthers their ideological/political goals.

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<sup>18</sup> Gartner, *Strategic Assessment in War*, 10.

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## **II. THE FARC-EP AS AN IDEOLOGICAL INSURGENCY**

### **A. BACKGROUND**

Colombia has a long history of civil war and internecine violence dating back to the Spanish conquest in the early 1500s. There were numerous failed rebellions against Spanish rule until 1819, when Simón Bolívar succeeded in winning independence for the Republic of Grand Colombia, consisting of modern day Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela. Internal conflicts continued, leading to the secession of Ecuador and Venezuela in 1830, but this did not stop the violence. Encouraged by weak central authority, rich landowners in Panama declared independence in 1903, and were immediately supported by the United States. After this spate of violence, known as the War of a Thousand Days, Colombia was relatively peaceful until 1946.

The triumph of a minority Conservative President in 1946, followed by the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in April 1948, plunged Colombia into renewed civil war. Gaitán was a populist politician who had campaigned for land reform, as well as other social programs, such as health, education, and housing and denounced the oligarchs who he claimed were dominating Colombian politics and economy for personal gain. It is widely accepted that Gaitán was set to win the 1950 presidential elections, a concept that displeased rivals on both ends of the political spectrum. Conservatives were naturally hostile to his proposed social reforms. However, the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) opposed him as well, fearing that Gaitán's incremental reforms would satisfy many potential revolutionaries, and forestall a communist uprising.

Gaitán's assassin, Juan Roa Sierra, was immediately killed by an enraged mob, leaving fertile ground for conspiracy theories claiming that groups ranging from the PCC to the CIA were responsible.<sup>19</sup> What is clear is that Gaitán's assassination intensified a nascent civil war that became known as "La Violencia," a decade of carnage that resulted in 180,000 to 300,000 deaths. While most insurgents were liberals, the PCC organized self-defense militias and guerilla units around Sumapaz, known as "independent

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<sup>19</sup> Frank Safford and Marco Palacios, *Columbia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 348.

republics.” In 1958, the National Front, a political arrangement between the Conservative and Liberal parties, came to power, under a power sharing agreement in which the Presidency would alternate between the two parties every four years. Other governmental positions were equally split, and limited social reforms initiated. This effectively ended the worst phase of “la Violencia.” However, isolated groups of diehard liberal “bandits” and the Communist “independent republics” held out into the 1960s.

By 1964, the National Front government was ready to move against the Communist enclaves, and ordered the Colombian Army (ENC) to dismantle the communes. While the “Laso Plan,” reminiscent of American search and destroy missions in Vietnam, was successful in disrupting the “independent republics,” many of its supporters were scattered, not killed.<sup>20</sup> Under the leadership of Manuel Marulanda Vélez (the nom de guerre of Pedro Antonio Marin) and Jacobo Arenas (Luis Morantes), the survivors formed the Southern Bloc, which was then renamed the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 1964. For the next two decades, the FARC carried out hit-and-run guerrilla raids against isolated police and military forces. Despite their grandiose statements about “Bolivarian”<sup>21</sup> revolution, they were unable to challenge the state directly and remained merely a nuisance to the Colombian government.<sup>22</sup>

The Seventh Guerrilla Conference in 1982 proved a turning point for the FARC. Adding the initials EP, for People’s Army (Ejército del Pueblo) symbolized the desire to turn the FARC into an organized military force capable of supplanting the Colombian government and establishing a people’s republic. Rank badges, uniforms and published regulations are indicative of the FARC-EP’s attempt to posture itself as a legitimate belligerent under the 1949 Geneva Conventions. This grasp for legitimacy was furthered by the 1984 La Uribe cease-fire arranged with then Colombian President Belisario Betancur. The FARC-EP kept its weapons during the three-year La Uribe truce. However, more importantly, the peace talks brought the insurgents a publicity bonanza.

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<sup>20</sup> Safford, *Columbia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society*, 356.

<sup>21</sup> Bolivarian Revolution is best described as Communism adapted to post-Cold War Latin America. As practiced by Venezuela’s President Hugo Chavez, it claims to be democratic socialism, mixing populist and authoritarian rule to achieve economic and social equality. Harold A. Trinkunas, “Defining Venezuela’s ‘Bolivarian Revolution,’” *Military Review* 85, no. 4 (July/August 2005): 39.

<sup>22</sup> Geoff Simons, *Colombia: A Brutal History* (London: SAQI, 2004), 42–43.

The FARC-EP was able to reach a much wider public base, and recruitment dramatically increased. Three years of relative peace also proved the breathing room the FARC-EP needed to organize into an effective military force.

Bolstered by thousands of new recruits, the FARC-EP shifted its tactics towards larger engagements, with multiple “fronts,” each consisting of several hundred fighters, converging on a target. At the same time the Colombian government’s success against the Medellin and Cali cartels created an opportunity for the FARC-EP to expand its involvement in the drug trade. Following the death of anti-drug ideologue Jacobo Arenas in 1990, the FARC-EP became a major trafficker of cocaine. This in turn financed the FARC-EP’s expansion. By the mid-1990s, the FARC-EP had reached its zenith, engaging ENC forces in conventional battles, and turning large parts of Colombia into “no-go” areas for the government, whose control over the countryside was weak in any case.

In 1996, the FARC-EP overran the Las Delicias military base, killing 54 and capturing 60 ENC troops. This was but the first of a series of large-scale attacks over the next two years. The ENC was forced to consolidate its units dispersed throughout the countryside, surrendering by some accounts 40 to 60 percent of the territory of Colombia to the insurgents, although much of the area surrendered was sparsely populated.<sup>23</sup> In 1998, newly elected President Andrés Pastrana Arango formally surrendered the *Despeje*, (cleared zone), 16,216 square miles of territory, to the guerillas as a prelude to negotiation. The FARC-EP took advantage of the Despeje to create a cocaine-producing mini-state, as well as launch attacks into the rest of Colombia. This expansion of the insurgency demonstrated the FARC-EP still desired to supplant the Colombian government and hence had a political goal.<sup>24</sup> The *Despeje* provided ample territory to cultivate coca, rearm, train, and seize hostages. If they were only interested in making

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<sup>23</sup> Simons, *Colombia: A Brutal History*, 114, 181.

<sup>24</sup> Paul E. Saskiewicz, “The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP): Marxist Leninist Insurgency or Criminal Enterprise?” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2005), 101–102.

money, the FARC-EP should have quietly dominated the *Despeje* without provoking the Colombian government into further combat.<sup>25</sup> Instead, the FARC-EP continued their offensive, triggering Plan Colombia.<sup>26</sup>

With increased U.S. military assistance, the ENC regrouped and reversed many of the gains made by the FARC-EP in the 1990s. *Plan Patriota* is the government's strategy to regain control of FARC-EP dominated territory, and it has enjoyed much success. The ENC has tried to avoid falling into a body-count mentality, not always with success. Rather, *Plan Patriota* looked to shift the psychological balance away from the FARC-EP and towards the government. Some metrics, such as percentage of contacts initiated by the FARC-EP vice the ENC may be cited, but overall, the better measure of success is the derailing of the FARC-EPs plans to control progressively more territory, and their withdrawal into traditional remote strongholds.<sup>27</sup> The FARC-EP realized that to win, it must prove to the Colombian population that it can supplant the government in Bogotá. Its actions in continuing the war despite being granted the *Despeje* demonstrated that the FARC-EP was not satisfied with partial control or a negotiated settlement, but desired to take over Colombia. Having demonstrated that the FARC-EP was not serious about talking peace, Pastrana and his successor as president from 2002, Álvaro Uribe, were able both to rally the population behind a military solution to the conflict and call on the United States to finance a military-police offensive with significant aid as part of Plan Colombia, and its Colombian manifestation *Plan Patriota*. The strategic dilemma this posed for the FARC was that political power cannot be seized by hiding out in the jungle, ambushing the occasional ENC patrol.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dario E. Teicher, "The Colombian War and the Narco-Terrorist Threat," in *The Homeland Security Papers: Stemming the Tide of Terror*, ed. M. W. Ritz, R. G. Hensley, Jr. and J. C. Whitmire (Maxwell AFB, FL: USAF Counterproliferation Center, 2004), 2, 14.

<sup>26</sup> In 1999, President Pastrana, facing an increasingly powerful FARC-EP, proposed Plan Colombia as a "Marshall Plan for Colombia." His original goal was economic and social development and security improvements, while the United States originally focused on reducing the supply of cocaine from Colombia. Both countries have modified their views to include combating Colombian paramilitary organizations, both right and left wing. U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Plan Colombia: A Progress Report* by Connie Veillette, CRS Report RL32774, Washington, DC: Office of Congressional Information and Publishing, January 11, 2006, 2–3.

<sup>27</sup> Gabriel Pinilla, "Are We Approaching the Real Defeat of the FARC in Colombia?" paper, U.S. Army War College, 2009, 11–13.

<sup>28</sup> In 2005, the FARC-EP implemented its *Plan Resistencia* as a counter to *Plan Patriota*. *Plan Resistencia* calls for the insurgents to "bend like the reed in the wind," and survive to fight another day.

While denouncing *Plan Patriota* as evidence that the Colombian government is in the thrall of Yankee capitalism, the FARC-EP leadership has effectively acknowledged its success by suspending large-scale operations and retreating into the jungle. This return to small unit guerrilla warfare is clearly a setback to the FARC-EP, and even as it announced Plan Resistencia, it continued to attempt large-scale operations, including a December 2005 attack believed to involve 500 insurgents. However, it is highly unlikely that the FARC-EP can regain the political and military momentum it enjoyed in the late 1990s. If the FARC-EP loses sufficient prestige, it will be unable to control territory by fear, denying it funds and recruits, and leading to its ultimate defeat. A few hardcore true believers may remain deep in the jungle, but without thousands of armed soldiers and the drug money they command, FARC-EP would cease to be a political or military threat to democratic government in Colombia.

Much has been written about the FARC-EP's imminent defeat in the past few years. Plan Colombia and *Plan Patriota* have certainly forced a dramatic change in the long Colombian civil war. The FARC-EP was forced to revert to stage one-guerilla operations, and the Colombian government is quick to tout metrics to prove their success. Assassinations of mayors are down 67% from 2002 to 2009, and roadblock kidnappings have been completely eradicated.<sup>29</sup> These are promising metrics, yet the FARC-EP is far from finished. In order to maximize this strategic success and prevent a FARC-EP resurgence, it is vital that the Colombian government continually carry out net assessments, and by doing so determine the correct metrics to track progress.

## B. METHODOLOGY

### 1. Centers of Gravity

As suggested above, Clausewitz believed that the center of gravity of a revolutionary insurgency lay with “the personalities of the leaders and public opinion.”<sup>30</sup> To extend the Clausewitzian analysis further, insurgencies may also be seen as alliances, either internal ones of various ideological, possibly tribal/racial groups, or external in so

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<sup>29</sup> David E. Spencer et al., *Colombia's Road to Recovery: Security and Governance 1982–2010* (National Defense University, 2011), 67.

<sup>30</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 595.

far as an insurgency may depend on foreign support for its survival in the form of resources or havens safe from attack. In this case, the center of gravity “lies in the community of interests.” This section will analyze each possible center of gravity with regards to both its importance to the FARC-EP and the potential impact of its destruction upon the FARC-EP as a political/military insurgency.

*a. Leadership*

The first center of gravity Clausewitz suggests is leadership. The Colombian Government would appear to agree with this, as it has targeted a succession of FARC-EP leaders for elimination. However, the very success enjoyed by the Colombian Government in killing FARC-EP leaders rules out leadership as the center of gravity. The FARC-EP’s structure allows it to absorb losses among senior officers, and it has demonstrated repeatedly that it can do so in practice.

The FARC-EP has a single Commander in Chief, currently Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri, “Timochenko.” Timochenko ascended to command following Alfonso Cano’s death at the hands of the ENC in 2011. Alfonso Cano succeeded Manuel Marulanda, who died of natural causes in 2008, who in turn succeeded Jacobo Arenas, the founding commander of the FARC-EP, who also died of natural causes, in 1990. Timochenko reportedly took command the day after Cano’s death, a smooth transition.<sup>31</sup> As long as the FARC-EP keeps their Continuity of Operations plan up to date, they appear able to replace commanders faster than the ENC can kill them.

The Commander in Chief is supported by a seven member Secretariat, whose members also serve as the commanders of the FARC-EP’s seven geographic commands, or blocks. Another 23 senior officers form the 30-man High Command, which acts as the FARC-EP’s general staff, setting policy and doctrine. These senior officers form a ready pool to replace fallen Secretariat members, who in turn stand ready to assume the Commander in Chief position.

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<sup>31</sup> Jeremy McDermott, “Colombia’s FARC Rebels Choose Hardliner ‘Timochenko’ to Lead,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 16, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/Latin-America-Monitor/2011/1116/Colombia-s-FARC-rebels-choose-hardliner-Timochenko-to-lead>.

The FARC-EP has demonstrated resiliency and the ability to replace top commanders in the face of multiple ENC successes. The deaths of Jacobo Arenas, Manual Maralunda, Alfonso Cano, and several other senior officers have only resulted in greater upward mobility for midgrade FARC-EP commanders. Just as the killing of Osama Bin Laden had little operational impact on Al Qaeda, killing multiple FARC-EP commanders has not led to an apparent collapse of their armed struggle. This is not to say that “Terrorist Wack-a-Mole” is useless, as it is hard to quantify the disruption inherent in frequently replacing top leaders in any organization. Still, unlike neighboring Peru’s Shining Path, the FARC-EP does not appear vulnerable to decapitation.

**b. Public Opinion**

Public opinion in guerrilla warfare is manifested in popular support. Mao Tse-tung considered popular support essential for successful guerrilla warfare.<sup>32</sup> If the FARC-EP is separated from the “sea of peasants,” will they wither away and die? Sympathetic civilians provide the guerrillas an information advantage over the state, hiding the insurgent from the state, while reporting on the state’s movements. Popular support translates into material support, as civilians provide food, shelter, and what little money they can spare. Additionally, the guerrilla must recruit, and the more popular his movement, the easier it is to find volunteers. Of all these advantages, the anonymity that popular support provides is the most important; if the guerrilla cannot hide, he has little chance of surviving even the weakest state’s army. Can the FARC-EP be defeated through the erosion of its base of support?

The FARC-EP’s base of support can be divided into two categories—genuine support among those who benefit from its protection, such as coca farmers, and those who support it out of coercion. In many regions, the FARC-EP lacks not only true popular support, but even sympathy from the very peasants it purports to defend.<sup>33</sup> In some areas, the FARC-EP has had a predatory relationship with the people it claims to be

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<sup>32</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *On Revolution and War*, ed. Mostafa Rejai (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co, 1969), 156–158.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas A. Marks, “Sustainability of Colombian Military/Strategic Support for “Democratic Security,”” *Strategic Studies Institute*, 2, July 2005, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub610.pdf>.

defending, threatening-and delivering-violence to ensure cooperation.<sup>34</sup> In other areas, the FARC-EP is seen as protection from corrupt government, or even as the only government in remote areas neglected by Bogotá. For some coca farmers, FARC-EP protection ensures the survival of their crops, and thus their livelihoods. None of this means the *campesinos* necessarily support the FARC-EP's ideological goals. Instead, they have judged it to be in their own self-interest, to support their FARC-EP, either to maximize gain or minimize loss.

Outside of its traditional strongholds and coca cultivating territory, terror is critical to the FARC-EP's continued existence. It cannot depend on the *campesinos* to hide guerrillas voluntarily, so the FARC-EP must impress upon them the heavy price they will pay for collaborating with the government. In order to expand beyond it the areas where it has traditionally enjoyed support, it must challenge the Colombian Government for control of regions that may prove less welcoming to FARC-EP encroachment. In determining the control of these regions, the Colombian peasants' pure preferences mean nothing, whether they actually prefer the FARC-EP or the government is meaningless. They may view the Colombian government as the legitimate government, but they will not act on that preference unless they have a reasonable assurance that the state can protect them from the FARC-EP. Hence, it is their assisted preference, determined by which side offers better rewards for loyalty, or harsher penalties for betrayal, that matters. The FARC-EP has a natural advantage over the state in this competition, since it promises far worse punishments. Representing a democratic state, the ENC is limited in the methods it can use to deal with civilians suspected of aiding the FARC-EP, (even though "state" retribution may come at the hands of the paramilitaries, which are often tolerated by the ENC) while the insurgents are free to torture and murder those who would betray "the people."<sup>35</sup> Combined with its narcotics profits, the FARC-EP can, in the areas that it controls, easily ensure that assisted preference means support for the insurgency.

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<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Human Rights Watch Letter to Commander Manuel Marulunda," July 10, 2001, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2001/07/09/colombia-rebel-abuses-worsening>.

<sup>35</sup> Max G. Manwaring, *Shadows of the Past and Images of the Future: Lessons for the Insurgencies in our Midst* (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), 16–18, 29–33.

Public opinion is the FARC-EP's center of gravity. That does not mean the *campesinos* love the guerrillas. Rather, the *campesinos* assess that their own self-interest, be it protection, profit, or survival, dictates they support or at least comply with the FARC-EP. Countering the FARC-EP's forced compliance requires a military and police solution to provide security in contested regions. Overcoming the perception that in some regions, the FARC-EP is a better alternative to corrupt or absentee government requires political, as well as legal reform, but still falls within counterinsurgency strategy. As long as the cultivation of coca is illegal, those who cultivate coca for their livelihood will support any group that provides protection against the government. However, this support is driven by rational self-interest—the *campesinos* assess that the benefit of their support outweighs its costs. While the Colombian Government will be hard pressed to win active support from coca cultivators, if it can roll back the FARC-EP to the point that they can no longer provide protection, the FARC-EP will lose one important source of support.

#### *c. Alliances*

Alliances are Clausewitz's third possible insurgent center of gravity. They can be divided into three subsets: Alliances internal to the group itself, alliances with other domestic groups, such as other guerrillas or criminal organizations, and foreign alliances, such as nation states or foreign insurgent groups. The FARC-EP has enjoyed alliances with all of the above at various times, and the Colombian Government has had mixed successes breaking them up.

The FARC-EP has been able to maintain its own internal alliances and avoid fracturing due to its pragmatic ideology. While it has roots in 1960s Marxist-Leninism, it has adopted a more flexible “Bolivarianism,” combining nationalist and socialist ideologies, and de-emphasizes Communist goals. The re-invention allowed the FARC-EP to survive the collapse of the Soviet Union and the general repudiation of Marxist-Leninism. Instead of focusing on what the FARC-EP hopes to achieve, they have focused on the Colombian Government's failure to efficiently govern, and on promising to correct those shortfalls. This allows greater leeway in ideology amongst its members,

and has prevented the creation of splinter factions with differing goals. In short, the FARC-EP has gone from trying to destroy the state to trying to take over the state.<sup>36</sup>

The next level of alliances is those with other internal groups, in this case other guerrillas and narco-traffickers. The second largest guerrilla group in Colombia is the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), or the National Liberation Army. While there are other insurgent groups in Colombia, only the ELN is large enough to be able to offer the FARC-EP a useful ally. The ELN is a Marxist and National Liberation group, allowing them to find common ground with the FARC-EP. They have significant ideological differences; most notably the ELN has successfully resisted the temptation of drug money. Instead, the ELN has relied on kidnapping and extortion for their funds, which may not seem morally superior to drug trafficking but is in accordance with ELN's ideology. Despite this principal difference, the FARC-EP and the ELN have cooperated in tactical assaults when the conditions were right. However, they have also fought each other for territorial control at times.<sup>37</sup>

The two rebel groups have both fought together and fought each other, but the Colombian Government managed to drive a wedge between them not through fighting but by negotiating. The ELN refused to participate in the 1998 Pastrana peace talks that temporarily won the FARC-EP a mini-state, the *Despeje*. Later, while President Uribe was relentlessly hounding the FARC-EP, the ELN was negotiating with Uribe. By negotiating separately, the Colombian Government effectively split the FARC-EP and the ELN, yet neither group has been defeated.

The other potential domestic allies for the FARC-EP are the drug traffickers. The history of the FARC-EP's involvement in the drug trade is convoluted and represents a “marriage of convenience.”<sup>38</sup> The FARC-EP has received enormous sums of money from drugs, as did their erstwhile sworn enemies the right wing United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). One of the unintended consequences of

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<sup>36</sup> Román D. Ortiz, “Insurgent Strategies in the Post-Cold War: The Case of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 25, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 130–131.

<sup>37</sup> Jeremy McDermott, “Marriage of Convenience,” *Janes Intelligence Review* 22, no. 3 (March 2010): 19–23.

<sup>38</sup> Max G. Manwaring, “Non-State Actors in Colombia: Threats to the State and to the Hemisphere” in *Non-State Threats and Future Wars*, ed. Robert J. Bunker (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 7.

President Uribe's demobilization of the AUC is that some of these groups, reconstituted into criminal groups known as BACRIMS, now actually cooperate with their former guerrilla enemies in the drug trade. The FARC-EP's involvement in the drug trade will be examined at length in Chapter III, but for now, it is sufficient to say that drug money is central to their finances. Once the FARC-EP got over their ideological barriers towards the drug trade, there was little the Colombian Government could do to prevent the cooperation of narco-trafficking organizations. While there are minor differences at the tactical level (the FARC-EP prefers to pay *campesinos* more for coca leaves than market conditions require), both the guerrillas and the traffickers frequently reach a division of labor where the FARC-EP protect the coca growers while the BACRIMS process and move the cocaine. This relationship is fluid and difficult to break.

The final possible set of alliances is external, both with nation states and other insurgent groups. The FARC-EP has cooperated with the Irish Republican Army, gaining urban tactics and Improvised Explosive Device knowledge in the process.<sup>39</sup> However, the IRA stood down in 2005 after reaching a negotiated settlement with the British and Irish governments. Further international ties are likely more trouble than they are worth. An alliance with Al Qaeda or its affiliates would draw the wrath of the United States, resulting at minimum in a drastic increase of *Plan Colombia*, but more likely inviting kinetic American involvement. Outside of Al Qaeda and its affiliates, few insurgent groups could offer much to the FARC-EP. The FARC-EP has over 40 years of combat experience against an increasingly well-funded and well-trained Colombian Army, and deep drug coffers. If anything, other insurgents should be asking the FARC-EP for assistance.

State actors are a different story. As North Vietnam and Yugoslavia offered safe havens for insurgents in South Vietnam and Greece, Venezuela and Ecuador could make up for the FARC-EP's loss of the territory in Colombia. Both countries have "Bolivarian" governments and sympathies for the FARC-EP, and provide covert aid and sanctuary. In this way, at least two of Colombia's neighbors have provided a degree of strategic depth to the FARC that has been effectively pressured by the Colombian armed

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<sup>39</sup> Martin Hodgson, "Colombian Guerrillas Get Training," *Christian Science Monitor* 93, no. 184 (August 2001).

forces at home. FARC-EP controlled territory is valuable for three things—military base camps, coca fields, and to demonstrate the insurgents’ superior governance. While Venezuela and Ecuador have been willing to allow the first, they have been more circumspect with the second two uses. Even their military and logistical support has been covert, and they have been quick to disavow it when exposed. The 2008 Andean crisis showed that neither Ecuador nor Venezuela was willing publicly to acknowledge direct support for the FARC-EP. After the ENC conducted a successful raid three kilometers into Ecuador, which resulted in the death of Raúl Reyes, known as the FARC’s “foreign minister,” and the capture of over 600 gigabytes of electronic intelligence, several Latin American nations protested the violation of Ecuadorian territory by Colombia. Nevertheless, the so-called “FARC Files” detailed negotiations with Venezuela to supply the guerrillas with small arms, man-portable ant-aircraft missiles, and uranium. Venezuela’s President Hugo Chavez, an ideological supporter of the FARC-EP, was quick to disavow any such support. After the short war scare between Colombia and its FARC-sympathetic neighbors, it became clear that no nation state was willing to openly ally with the FARC-EP.<sup>40</sup>

While Venezuela and Ecuador deny association with the FARC-EPs illegal activities, there is widespread tolerance for narcotics trafficking and money laundering in both countries. The presence of FARC-EP camps and leaders in their safe havens is also widely acknowledged. Still, there are limits to the support Venezuela and Ecuador are willing to provide. Allowing the FARC-EP to openly use their territory for coca cultivation would quickly lead to a nation state becoming an international pariah. The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs demonstrates the general international community’s commitment to combat illegal drug production. While there is some international tolerance for the FARC-EP as a revolutionary movement (many countries, such as Argentina and Brazil do not classify them as a terrorist organization) there is very little tolerance for narco-traffickers.<sup>41</sup> Bolivia’s withdrawal from the Single Convention

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<sup>40</sup> The Economist, “The Americas: The FARC Files; Colombia and Venezuela,” 387, no. 8581 (May 2008): 53–54.

<sup>41</sup> Francisco E. Thoumi, “The International Drug Control Regime’s Straight Jacket: Are There Any Policy Options?,” *Springerlink*, March 2010, <http://www.springerlink.com/content/8n62775383w51p22/>.

on Narcotic Drugs led to some labeling it as a narco-state and even calling for international action to impose a regime change.<sup>42</sup> As unlikely as it is that the UN, the Organization of American States (OAS), or the United States would commit ground troops to force a regime change in Bolivia, the United States does have a history of clandestine regime change in South America. The United States put Venezuela on an “antidrug blacklist” for countries that have notably failed to combat the international drug trade, denying them foreign aid.<sup>43</sup> While Venezuela is not dependent on America aid, and President Chavez appears to enjoy provoking the *Norteamericanos*, overt drug production could result in more serious sanctions, with international support. Both Bolivia and Venezuela are walking a fine line, antagonizing the United States while remaining below the regime change threshold. Overt support for the FARC-EP’s drug business could break that threshold.

Finally, while Venezuela and Ecuador have not yet allowed the FARC-EP to set up a shadow government in a swath of their territory, they tolerate *de facto* FARC-EP influence over some border regions, either out of sympathy, corruption, or because their militaries are simply unable to exert state presence. While this diminishes the legitimacy and power of the nation state in that region, most Latin American states have historically been characterized by weak central control. As Hezbollah has become the *de facto* government of large parts of Lebanon, Venezuela and especially Ecuador have seen their sovereignty eroded by the FARC-EP control of their territory. While this is a critical vulnerability of the FARC-EP, it is not a center of gravity, as the FARC-EP could survive without it.

The Colombian Government has had mixed successes disrupting the FARC-EP’s alliances. It has not been able to fracture the FARC-EP, but it has been able to divide and erode its relationship with some other Colombian insurgent groups. It has not been able to separate the FARC-EP from the narco-traffickers, but the FARC-EP’s cooperation with them has been is a wary one based on mutual commercial interests.

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<sup>42</sup> James L. Zackrison, “When States Pursue a Narcotic Agenda,” *Defense and Foreign Affairs* 40, no. 3 (2012): 4–7.

<sup>43</sup> Barack Obama, “Presidential Memorandum – Presidential Determination on Major Illicit Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2013.”

Despite Colombia's strained foreign relations with its neighbors, almost leading to war in 2008, the FARC-EP has been unable to get more than limited covert support from sympathetic governments. Eliminating these alliances would certainly hurt the FARC-EP, but, it would not destroy it, proving that alliances are not its center of gravity.

## **2. Critical Vulnerabilities**

Public opinion is the FARC-EP's center of gravity. The Colombian Government has successfully denied the FARC-EP the ability to coerce popular support in many regions, and has demonstrated the ability to provide good governance when it applies sufficient priority to that effort.<sup>44</sup> However, the Colombian Government has had the least success in denying the FARC-EP the support of coca cultivators. As the Colombian Government cannot win the active support of those who make a living cultivating an illegal crop, their best approach is to deny the FARC-EP the ability to offer credible protection to coca fields. Even if the coca cultivators still resent the government's eradication programs, they would be hesitant to give support to a group that could not offer them viable protection. In order to divorce the FARC-EP from its coca supporters, the Colombian Government must win the "ground game," controlling its territory enough to deny the FARC-EP freedom of action.

Territorial control is the FARC-EP's critical vulnerability. This is not to say in a conventional sense, with opposing trench lines clearly marking the extent of the FARC-EP's territory, but rather, in the ability to move freely while restricting the state's access. If the ENC requires a full platoon to patrol an area, then it does not control that territory, despite its temporary ability to access that space. However, if the National Police (PN) routinely dispatches individual officers to walk a beat, then the government controls that territory. Conversely, the FARC-EP does not need to hold overt rallies to control an area. It simply must be able to access any area it so pleases with a reasonable amount of security. In coca cultivating regions, the FARC-EP must exercise enough control to offer a reasonable level of protection to the coca fields. Control is mutually exclusive, yet it is relative, not binary, in that a group may have varying levels of control, not just "control"

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<sup>44</sup> Douglas Porch, "The Hunt for Martín Caballero," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, DOI:10.1080/01402390.2011.563914.

or “doesn’t control.”<sup>45</sup> Additionally, FARC-EP and the Colombian Government are not the only two groups seeking to exercise control. Other guerrilla groups, remnants of the right-wing paramilitaries, BACRIMs, and other armed groups contest both the government’s and the FARC-EP’s territorial control. Consequently, control is a very ambiguous concept, and is much harder to quantify than, say, the destruction of guerrilla fronts.

Identifying the FARC-EP’s critical vulnerability as their ability to control territory suggests possible strategies to attack that vulnerability. One possible strategy is to deny them intelligence on the state forces. While operational security is an important aspect of combating the FARC-EP, the Colombian government cannot hide all potential targets. Police informers, special forces patrols, and targeted raids can, and must be obscured from the FARC-EP’s visibility. However, the everyday organs of government, the policemen, judges, civil servants, doctors, schoolteachers, and others who make the modern nation-state possible, must be out in the open in order to function. Tax records are available in town halls, which identify targets for kidnapping or extortion. The state cannot curtail the insurgents’ ability to locate targets.

Since the Colombian government cannot deny the FARC-EP intelligence on every government appendage, it must instead protect these targets. If the ENC and the police can deny the FARC-EP the ability to conduct successful intimidation, then the state’s hand is strengthened. The FARC-EP was founded to effect social chance through the use or threat of force. If this tactic is denied, then this compromises the FARC-EP’s strategy. This effectively highlights the shortcoming of *Plan Resistencia*. The FARC-EP’s successes of the late 1990s demonstrated that they could conduct battalion level conventional operations; by following *Plan Resistencia* and retreating to their jungle sanctuaries, they have reverted to stage one guerilla warfare, an operational setback. Did the FARC-EP conduct a strategic assessment of their decision to escalate to stage two warfare in the 1990s? Was that decision premature or poorly executed?

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<sup>45</sup> Gordon H. McCormick, “People’s War,” *Encyclopedia of Conflicts since World War II* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe Reference, 1999), 25–28.

While insurgency doctrine allows for temporary reversions to guerrilla warfare if the state proves too strong, history presents a mixed verdict on the effects of interrupting the guerrillas' momentum. The North Vietnamese consistently misjudged the correct time to go conventional, suffering costly battlefield defeats in 1968 and 1972, yet were able to reconstitute and ultimately defeat South Vietnam. Likewise, Mao himself was virtually defeated when he initiated the Long March in 1934, yet he found sanctuary in the interior of China, and was later able to emerge victorious. While there are more examples of insurgents overcoming temporary setbacks, like the two mentioned, none of them are completely analogous with the situation in Colombia. The guerrillas in South Vietnam enjoyed considerable support from North Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The Chinese Communists overthrew a state weakened by a decade of foreign occupation; moreover, the Kuomintang had never truly controlled China before the Japanese invasion. The FARC-EP faces a long-established state that enjoys significant support from the sole surviving superpower. Unlike Nationalist China or South Vietnam, Colombia has little to fear from its neighbors, and can focus its effort on internal stability.

The Communist insurgency in Greece immediately following World War II may provide a better comparison, albeit one that does not bode well for the FARC-EP. The Democratic Army of Greece (DSE) was the militant arm of the country's persecuted Communist Party. While the DSE enjoyed greater external support than the FARC-EP, it was predominately a domestic insurgency. In 1947, when the Greek Communist leadership felt the stage was set for revolution, the DSE "went conventional." Abandoning hit-and run guerrilla tactics, the DSE banked on seizing and holding a reasonably sized town to demonstrate their legitimacy. At first, the DSE caught the Greek National Army (GNA) off guard. However, with American assistance, the GNA was rebuilt. After a year in which the insurgents had pushed operations to within 20 kilometers of Athens, the superior training and equipment of the GNA came into effect. The GNA shattered the DSE's military formations in successive conventional battles, and it became clear that if the DSE continued to attempt to defend its gains, it would be annihilated. The insurgents' only choice was to revert to guerrilla operations.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> David H. Close, *The Origins of the Greek Civil War* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1995), 212.

While the DSE's only chance for survival in 1949 was to revert to the guerrilla tactics that worked so well in 1946, this was not a politically viable option. The first obstacle to deescalating their operations was ideological. The Greek Communist Party leadership had declared that the time was right for revolution in Greece, and the Party was always correct. To even suggest reverting to guerrilla warfare implied that the Party was mistaken, and such heresy resulted in the execution of several DSE commanders.<sup>47</sup> Outside of Communist theory, deescalating the violence was impossible for the DSE from a public relations standpoint. By ending its conventional operations and dispersing, after it had declared the liberation of Greece was at hand, the DSE would be tacitly admitting defeat. If the peasants of rural Greece perceived the GNA to be winning, they would “bandwagon” onto the government’s side, accelerating the DSE’s decline. Insurgency is as much about perceptions as it is about military reality. Unwilling to admit operational defeat, the DSE suffered a strategic defeat. Does the FARC-EP face a similar problem?

Like the DSE, the FARC-EP had gained the initiative over the ENC during the 1996–1998 time frame, ambushing and defeating battalion-sized ENC formations. As was the case in Greece, the Colombian Armed Forces, FMC, were rebuilt with American assistance, and enacted an effective counterattack, disrupting the FARC-EP’s offensive and forcing them to delay their planned “liberation” of Bogota. A large factor in the FMC’s resurgence was their increase in air power. The number of helicopters more than quadrupled as they received modern UH-60 Blackhawks, greatly increasing the ENC’s air mobility. This allowed the ENC to bring the fight to previously inaccessible FARC-EP controlled regions. At the same time, the Colombian Air Force received 25 Super Tucano close air support aircraft, suitable for counterinsurgency operations.<sup>48</sup> The availability of helicopters to evacuate wounded soldiers and the presence of friendly air support increased troop morale, subsequently increasing their combat effectiveness.

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<sup>47</sup> Charles R. Shrader, *The Withered Vine: Logistics and the Communist Insurgency in Greece, 1945–1949* (Westport, CN: Prager, 1999), 72.

<sup>48</sup> Peter DeShazo, Johanna Mendelson Forman, and Phillip McLean, “Countering Threats to Security and Stability in a Failing State, Lessons from Colombia,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, September 2009, [http://csis.org/files/publication/090930\\_DeShazo\\_CounteringThreats\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/090930_DeShazo_CounteringThreats_Web.pdf), 22.

Similarly, the FARC-EP proclaimed the “final liberation” was at hand. However, all the branches of the FMC have seen an increase in training and professionalism with such dramatic results that people have predicted the defeat of the FARC-EP. The FARC-EP’s failure to achieve their stated goal has cost them prestige, and may yet result in their defeat.<sup>49</sup>

Whereas the DSE could not hold significant territory, the Colombian government gifted the FARC-EP with an official sanctuary. President Pastrana’s abortive 1998 negotiations with the FARC-EP formalized guerrilla control of an area the size of Switzerland. This territorial concession had far more than mere tactical military implications, since it suggested legitimizing the FARC-EP as a political actor. The FARC-EP claimed that since they controlled contiguous territory, the conflict in Colombia was a civil war, not an insurrection, with the attendant legal ramifications. International recognition of the FARC-EP as a lawful combatant would greatly assist their cause, and would help to ease the stigma of being on the U.S. State Department’s terrorist list.

Beyond abstract legal ramifications, surrendering a mini-state to the FARC-EP was a major strategic milestone for the insurgents. Guerrilla controlled territories have become vital to the FARC-EP’s survival. From this territory, they are able to recruit and train replacements, launch guerrilla raids into neighboring government-controlled areas, and even relax with some beach volleyball.<sup>50</sup> In many regions, the FARC-EP lacks popular support, so it must coerce the *campesinos* to prove intelligence, shelter, and anonymity, vital supplies for an insurgent. In *de jure* guerrilla controlled territory, intimidating the peasants is even easier than it is in the rest of the countryside. Normally, the state and the guerrilla compete for popular support. In the *Despeje*, the Colombian government temporarily ceded a marginal area in order to buy time to demonstrate the FARC-EP’s unwillingness to negotiate, while simultaneously rebuild its alliance with

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<sup>49</sup> Manwaring, “Non-State Actors in Colombia: Threats to the State and to the Hemisphere,” 7.

<sup>50</sup> Houston Chronicle, “The Rebel Sanctuary,” August 3, 2001.

Washington and to reconstitute its own forces. Subsequently, the Colombian Government took the offensive substantially to reduce the amount of territory under FARC-EP control.

As tempting as it seems to identify the FARC-EP's ability to avoid destruction at the hands of the ENC as their critical vulnerability, that is a chimera. An insurgent group's ability to avoid destruction at the hands of the state is dependent upon one of two factors: stealth or combat power. Traditionally, it is stealth that protects nascent insurgent groups, then, as the insurgency gains momentum, it will field forces that can defeat governmental military units. When the insurgent abandons anonymity, this is when the insurgent has "gone conventional." Depending on the military prowess of the state, an insurgent group may choose open battle early in the conflict, or it may be forced to remain in the "Dragonworld"<sup>51</sup> for extended periods of time. While it may be possible to overthrow a weak government without facing them in open battle, the Government of Colombia enjoys enough support and legitimacy to give it considerable staying power. It is highly unlikely the FARC-EP will be able to overthrow the government without expanding its base of support, either willing or coerced.

One of the false lessons from the American experience in Vietnam is that an insurgent organization need not progress beyond guerrilla warfare; rather, it can simply outwait its opponent. Enough casualties will drain the state's will, and then the state will capitulate. While this might be effective in a small number of cases, typically where the government is unstable to begin with, it is rarely applicable and not a good strategy on which an insurgent should rely. While the United States did ultimately lose its will and withdraw from South Vietnam mid-conflict, the Republic of Vietnam remained a sovereign nation and continued to fight for its survival. It required a conventional invasion, complete with tanks and jet fighters, to raise a communist flag in Saigon. Additionally, the single biggest factor leading to the American withdrawal was the failed 1968 Tet Offensive, a premature attempt by the North Vietnamese to go to stage three

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<sup>51</sup> J. Bowyer Bell, "Aspects of the Dragonworld: Covert Communications and the Rebel Ecosystem," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 3, no. 1 (1989): 17–18.

operations. While a tactical defeat, the Tet Offensive shocked the American public and led influential media personalities, such as Walter Cronkite to declare the war unwinnable.<sup>52</sup>

As in Vietnam, the FARC-EP cannot win by merely outlasting the Government of Colombia. The state will not lose its will to fight, and must be actively defeated. This requires the FARC-EP to field fronts capable of standing up to the ENC in open battle, and winning. But its inability to win on the battlefield does not necessarily translate into defeat. Denying the FARC-EP the ability to conduct stage two operations will not lead to their total destruction, just continued guerrilla warfare. Therefore, it is not a critical vulnerability.

If the FARC-EP cannot survive through besting the ENC in open combat, it must survive through anonymity, blending into Mao's famous "sea of peasants." Such anonymity requires the assistance of the civilian population it is attempting to use for camouflage. With the *campesinos* aiding the FARC-EP, the insurgents would have an early-warning net, allowing them to avoid ENC sweeps. At the same time, they can cache their weapons and pretend to be civilians. The FARC-EP has squandered most of its potential for popular support through its indiscriminate attacks, which often kill more civilians than regime combatants; its widespread use of kidnapping; and other terrorist tactics. Yet they retain footholds in remote areas, where the population is traditionally hostile to the government, like Neiva or the Bajo Cauca, and where they protect those engaged in illicit activities, like coca growing or gold prospecting in Northern Antioquia.

Absent willing support from the *campesinos*, the FARC-EP relies on "revolutionary justice" to maintain control of the civilians in its territory, and punishments for collaboration tend towards the extreme. This can especially be the case when government troops temporarily occupy a village then inevitably move on. Since the insurgents are still present, they can punish those who assisted the regime's representatives during their short visit. This phenomenon, common in Vietnam, is less of a factor in Colombia, where the national government's strategy is to emplace agents

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<sup>52</sup> Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 6–8.

through the country. A permanent police or army presence encourages the *campesinos* to cooperate with the regime, as there is an increased expectation of protection from guerrilla reprisals. By extending local police patrols throughout the contested territory, the government can bolster popular support, shift the *campesinos*' assisted preferences towards the regime, and locate guerrilla forces. Unfortunately, in Colombia the police are often thin on the ground because municipalities cannot afford to pay them, and they are unpopular because they are regarded as corrupt. Defeat of the FARC-EP's larger fronts forces them to go to ground, but will not destroy the organization. Denying the FARC-EP the ability to blend in with the civilians once they have gone to ground may lead to the destruction of the FARC-EP as an organization in some areas where they do not have deep roots. Elsewhere, they can profit from a general atmosphere of lawlessness and defiance towards authority as in the barrios of Bogotá, Medellín or Buenaventura.

The FARC-EP's support from coca cultivating *campesinos* may appear to be a critical vulnerability, but it relies on the perception that the FARC-EP can protect their fields. This protection, in turn, relies on the FARC-EP's ability to prevent the government from destroying those fields, either by denying them knowledge of the locations or making it too costly for the government to destroy them. The FARC-EP must deny the government the ability to maintain its presence throughout contested regions by forcing the consolidation of small military and police units, which in turn cannot cover as much territory. In the fight for "control," the government must push its presence down to the local level in the smallest possible units, while the insurgent must eliminate small units and force the regime to concentrate its agents into the largest possible units, with the corresponding loss of presence in the space between government pockets. In this space, the FARC-EP can protect coca fields, intimidate uncooperative civilians, and establish shadow governments, all to shift public opinion towards the insurgents.

### 3. Metrics

This suggests an obvious metric to measure progress in counterinsurgency: the size of the average unit of regime agents. If the regime can send individual policemen on foot-patrols with an acceptable chance of survival, than it controls the territory being patrolled and offers little space for the insurgents to operate. Conversely, if entire

battalions are swallowed up by the insurgents, as happened to the French on Route Coloniale 4 in 1950, then that is obviously guerrilla controlled territory. However, where does the line between government control and insurgent control lie? Is it at squad-sized patrols? Or two-man rural police outposts? There are neighborhoods in the United States that the police will not patrol individually, but this does not mean that those neighborhoods are insurgent controlled. There may not be a hard number, the minimum number of troops required to conduct a patrol that decides which side controls a given area. Likewise, the nature of the government's presence affects the degree to which it controls territory. A Special Forces "A" Team or a Marine rifle squad in the CIDG or CAP<sup>53</sup> programs effectively controlled its assigned village in Vietnam, while a comparable number of troops riding around in up-armored HMMWVs or a pair of riverine patrol boats do not even control out to the maximum range of their weapons today.

It is tempting to measure control by the number of casualties the government suffers while conducting presence missions, the number of police stations bombed, the number of schools burnt out, and other attacks upon regime representatives. Yet heavy casualties inflicted upon a counterinsurgency force may indicate one of two things. The army may be suffering losses because the insurgents have the advantage, are gaining momentum, and are on the verge of winning. Or they may be taking casualties because the army is successfully forcing the guerrillas to fight, and is destroying the insurgent organization despite taking heavy casualties. These two scenarios demonstrate the same statistics, yet diametrically opposed interpretations. Furthermore, heavy casualties indicative of pitched battles, even if the state is winning them, do not necessarily favor the state. The mere fact that the state must fight these battles means that the insurgent has sufficient strength to form large units and has contemplated going conventional, indicating regime weakness. Still, heavy government casualties do not automatically indicate an insurgent advantage. Perhaps the best example of this is the infamous 1968

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<sup>53</sup> The Civilian Irregular Defense Group was established by the CIA in 1961 South Vietnam. Army Special Forces trained Montagnard tribesmen to defend their villages, denying the Viet Cong access to those villages, and thus logistical support. Likewise, the U.S. Marine Corps' Combined Action Program embedded squads of American Marines in Vietnamese villages. Both programs have frequently been cited as a favorable alternative to the U.S.'s attrition warfare in Vietnam.

Tet Offensive. U.S. forces took heavier casualties in February 1968 than any other month of the war, yet did so in the process of destroying the Viet Cong as an effective fighting force.<sup>54</sup>

Just as heavy casualties do not indicate success or failure for the state, the lack of casualties is likewise an inconclusive metric. Low casualties may indicate that the insurgents have been defeated and lack the ability to inflict casualties, or they may simply be laying low and avoiding confrontations. Low regime casualties may indicate that there is little or no guerrilla presence in an area or it may indicate little regime presence, as all its troops have been withdrawn into fortified based camps. Hiding behind concertina wire and minefields is an effective way to limit friendly casualties in the short term, but it is counterproductive in the long term. If the state refuses to emerge from its shelter, then the guerrillas have won a major victory without having to fight. If the army limits its patrols “beyond the wire,” it will limit casualties at the price of allowing the guerrillas space and time to recruit, train, and generally prepare to overthrow the state.

While friendly casualties are a poor metric in counterinsurgency, enemy casualties may be the worst measure to judge progress. Not only is it difficult to get an accurate picture of the insurgents’ strength by measuring his losses, a body count mentality encourages behavior that is counterproductive to effective counterinsurgency strategy. As with friendly casualties, high enemy kill rates do not account for insurgent recruitment, and the guerrillas may be able to make good their losses despite heavy casualties. Likewise, a low body count may indicate that the insurgent is successfully avoiding contact with the army, or that he is simply running out of warm bodies. But worse than the possibly misleading nature of body count statistics, measuring progress in terms of enemy killed leads to pressure for tactical commanders to increase their kills. Andrew Krepinevich did a wonderful job illustrating how such pressures caused the U.S. Army in Vietnam to blur the line between enemy combatants and civilians who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Such bloodthirsty tactics cost the

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<sup>54</sup> Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*, 319.

U.S. popular support, both from the South Vietnamese and its own domestic audience. Random harassment and interdiction artillery fire into unobserved sectors is not a good way to win friends among the local population.<sup>55</sup>

Another metric currently in vogue with counterinsurgency experts is measuring which side initiates contacts, the theory being that whichever side initiates the majority of the engagements is winning. Like the previously discussed casualties metrics, this measurement can be interpreted to indicate different circumstances. At first glance, it is preferable to be on the side that is doing the ambushing, rather than the side being ambushed, and this is certainly true at the lowest tactical level. Conventional wisdom would have the guerrillas choosing to fight only when they enjoyed local force superiority and stand a good chance of winning the battle; otherwise, they would merely melt away into the jungle. Following this logic, if the guerrillas were initiating the majority of engagements, they would be victorious in the majority of these contacts, showing the advantage shifting towards the insurgent. However, the guerrilla's ability to refuse battle is only 100% in a theoretical world. In the real world, insurgent organizations attempt to seize control of territory, and then must defend that territory. By threatening critical guerrilla infrastructure, such as training camps, command centers, or, in the case of the FARC-EP, coca fields, the army can force the insurgents to offer battle at a disadvantage. Again, in theory, there should be no physical location so critical to an insurgent organization that it will be forced to defend it in open battle. But the real world history of guerrilla warfare proves that such an organization must control territory or it will be marginalized as a terrorist group, and then as mere criminals. While this is no magic formula to force guerrillas to stand and fight, it has been done, and so guerrilla initiated contacts are not necessarily negative indicators for the state.

Likewise, while the state would prefer that its army initiate the majority of engagements with the insurgents, doing so is not automatically an indicator that the war is going well for the state. Indeed, it can be a sign of imminent regime collapse, as was seen in Vietnam with the Mobile Guerrilla Force. Under this program, companies of Montagard tribesmen, led by American Special Forces soldiers, were deployed into Viet

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<sup>55</sup> Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 164–172.

Cong sanctuaries to “out-guerrilla the guerrillas.” They racked up an impressive kill ratio, ambushing Viet Cong Main Force and North Vietnamese Army units, and often initiated contact with the Communists. Both the high enemy body counts and the government-controlled engagements would seem indicative of regime strength. Deeper analysis, however, reveals that the reason the Mobile Guerrilla Force enjoyed such good hunting was the large amount of game, Communist troops, present in there operational areas.<sup>56</sup> In this instance, the metric that the army was initiating the majority of engagements with the insurgents was more indicative of the insurgents having progressed to conventional warfare, and the government being in danger of imminent defeat.

### C. CONCLUSION

By conducting a net assessment of the FARC-EP as an ideological movement with a populist political and social agenda in a Latin American context, this chapter demonstrates how to analyze a revolutionary group in order to determine the correct metrics to gauge process. In the case of the FARC-EP, their center of gravity is the popular support they enjoy in their sanctuaries, whether it is coerced or because of the advantages the FARC-EP presence and protection brings to the inhabitants. This support exists only as long as there are gaps in the state’s authority that allow the insurgents to operate. Deny the FARC-EP this space, and they will lose control of the contested territory. Without this control, they have less to offer their supporters, and will lose popular support, thereby denying them funding, recruits and anonymity, and guerrillas who cannot hide amongst the civilian population have short life expectancies.

Assessing the FARC-EP’s center of gravity and critical vulnerability is rather straightforward; unfortunately, no simple metric exists that can tell whether the government controls a given area. The metrics discussed above can be alternatively interpreted to indicate that either side has the advantage. Ideally, the absence of FARC-EP attacks in a region would be an indicator of government control. However, if the FARC-EP has the local peasants cowed or seduced into cooperation, and the local regime representatives are inviolate yet ineffective in well-defended fortifications that they rarely leave, then the guerrillas need not conduct attacks in that region, as they have already

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<sup>56</sup> James C. Donahue, *Mobile Guerrilla Force* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1999), 185.

won control. The best metrics to measure the level of government control is the average size of regime outposts and patrol, how much time the regime representatives spend interacting with the local population, and the casualty rates among those isolated small units. Viewed as a set, these metrics indicate whether the regime or the rebels control a region; individually, they are potentially misleading.

### **III. THE FARC AS A CRIMINAL ORGANIZATION**

#### **A. BACKGROUND**

Another school of thought focuses less on popular following and more on FARC-EP's resources. Some argue that it could not survive without resources. In fact, resources in the form of cocaine have become the *raison d'être* of the FARC-EP, to the point that in some areas the FARC-EP has become a criminal cartel. However, whether it is an ideological movement or a criminal organization, targeting resources also presents problems.

The indigenous people who inhabited the Andes Mountains have used coca leaves as a stimulant since ancient times. In addition to providing energy, coca leaves contain valuable nutrients, and chewing them was literally a life or death matter for the indigenous peoples. Coca was so important that they measured distance in cocada, the distance a man could walk on a single mouthful of leaves. Chewing coca leaves introduces only a limited amount of the cocaine alkaloid into the user's bloodstream, resulting in a mild sense of exhilaration, as well as numbing the mouth, and suppressing hunger, thirst, and fatigue. Coca tea, *mate de coca*, is thought by many to prevent altitude sickness. Like chewing, *mate de coca* is an inefficient method to ingest the cocaine alkaloid, and results in effects similar to drinking caffeinated beverages. Coca has been a part of Andean life for millennia, but it was not until the modern age that it was refined into cocaine.<sup>57</sup>

In 1855, German chemist Friedrich Gaedcke first isolated cocaine from coca leaves, which soon found a number of uses. Cocaine was included in patent medicines, and promoters promised a wide variety of beneficial side effects. Cocaine was used as a local anesthetic and to treat morphine addiction, while Europeans valued its hunger- and fatigue suppressing qualities. Famously, the original recipe for Coca-Cola included coca leaves.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Department of Justice, *CIA-Contra-Crack Controversy*, (n.d.), <http://www.justice.gov/oig/special/9712/appc.htm#Appendix C>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Despite cocaine's original acceptance in European and North American society, by the beginning of the 20th century it was apparent that it was highly addictive and had serious side effects. In the United States, the growing prohibition movement resulted in the 1914 Harrison Narcotics Tax Act, which outlawed cocaine, as well as narcotics, such as opium. Coca-Cola had already changed its formula in 1906 to used coca leaves that had been chemically treated to remove the cocaine alkaloid. Due to social stigma, cocaine use in the United States dropped off sharply after the Harrison Act, and illegal use of cocaine was rare until the late 1970s. U.S. cocaine use peaked around 1982–1984 with approximately nine million users before dropping rapidly.<sup>59</sup> The U.S. government estimated approximately 4.7 million cocaine users in America in 2010, representing a considerable decrease since its peak. However, recent statistics show that the number of new cocaine users has remained constant, around 650,000, since 2008.<sup>60</sup> The constant source of new cocaine users indicates that demand reduction in the United States has stagnated at best, or reached its natural limit, requiring more emphasis be placed on supply reduction in order to positively affect trends on the War on Drugs.

The sharp spike in cocaine use in the early 1980s enabled the rise of various drug cartels in Mexico and Colombia, of which the Medellín cartel was the most powerful. Run by Pablo Escobar, the Medellín cartel was worth an estimated \$28 billion, and Escobar himself was listed as the seventh richest man in the world by *Forbes* magazine. The very existence of democratic rule in Colombia was threatened, with the distinct possibility of the drug cartels turning Colombia into an outlaw narcotics state.<sup>61</sup> One response was the rise of *Los Pepes*, a vigilante group would later influence the formation of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, AUC, a vehemently anti-FARC right-wing paramilitary organization.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> C. Peter Rydell and Susan S. Everingham, *Controlling Cocaine: Supply and Demand Programs* (Santa Monica, CA: 1994: RAND), 1.

<sup>60</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Results from the 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings* (NSDUH Series H-41, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 11-4658 (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2011).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 53, 80–81.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 176–179.

The FARC-EP originally abstained from involvement in drug trafficking, but the Seventh Guerilla Conference in 1982 decided to take advantage of narco dollars. At first, the FARC-EP limited its involvement to revolutionary taxes on all aspects of cocaine production, from coca leaves to processing agents to cocaine base shipments through its territory. Additionally, the FARC-EP provided security for coca fields, for a price.<sup>63</sup> The death of Jacobo Arenas, an opponent of drug trafficking, eliminated the FARC-EP's ideological barrier to cocaine production and the PNC's successful campaigns against the cartels created an opening for greater FARC-EP involvement in the cocaine industry. Rather than protecting others' coca crops, the FARC-EP took over plant cultivation, as well as processing the leaves into cocaine base. The *Despeje* granted to the FARC-EP by President Pastrana allowed them to greatly increase their coca production, and the FARC-EP was soon trafficking billions of dollars' worth of cocaine. By March 2006, the U.S. Department of Justice declared that the FARC-EP was the world's largest producer of cocaine.<sup>64</sup>

Cocaine production offers immense profits for the FARC-EP. Coca leaves sell for around \$1–2 per kilogram, coca base around \$800–1000 per kilogram, and \$20,000–30,000 per kilogram wholesale in the United States. Despite this mark-up, retail dealers realize huge profits, selling individual doses for around \$120–140 per gram, or \$120,000–140,000 per kilogram. Clearly, the farmers who cultivate coca leaves realize hardly any profit, selling their product for dollars per kilo. It takes around 100 kilos of coca leaves to produce a kilo of coca base leaving the initial processors with a respectable 300% profit, similar to what retail distributors in consumer nations enjoy. Coca paste yields pure cocaine on an approximately two-to-one ratio, meaning that the group who turns coca paste into wholesale cocaine realizes around 1,000% profit. This process turns \$400 of coca leaves into \$20,000 of wholesale product, nearly 5,000 percent profit. Multiplied by the estimated 400 metric tons that gets past interdiction efforts (estimating the amount of cocaine that is not intercepted is inherently troublesome, and this chapter

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<sup>63</sup> Teicher, "The Colombian War and the Narco-Terrorist Threat," 25–27.

<sup>64</sup> Department of Justice, "United States Charges 50 Leaders of Narco-Terrorist FARC in Colombia with Supplying More Than Half the World's Cocaine," March 22, 2006, <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pr032206a.html>.

will discuss why such estimations are almost certainly low), means that the Colombian cocaine trade is an \$8 billion a year industry. Not all of that money goes straight to the FARC-EP. Within Colombia, they are not the only producer of cocaine, and profit is extracted at all levels of transportation and distribution. Frequently, the FARC-EP collects taxes and protection fees on drug traffickers rather than process and traffic the drugs themselves. Regardless, the FARC-EP is making hundreds of millions of dollars annually off the cocaine trade.<sup>65</sup>

## B. METHODOLOGY

### 1. Center of Gravity

Accessing the FARC-EP as a criminal gang primarily interested in maximizing profit through cocaine production suggests several centers of gravity that differ radically than if they are an ideological revolutionary movement interested in replacing the democratic government of Colombia with a dictatorship of the proletariat. Lieten and Wolf addressed counter-insurgency from an economics viewpoint, translating inputs into recruits and products into guerrilla attacks and so forth, but the FARC-EP as a drug producer allows a more direct application of economic theory. Inputs include the coca leaves and the chemicals required to process them into cocaine, production is the processing itself, and distribution is the trafficking of cocaine into consumer nations. Supply is an aggregate of these factors, resulting in the amount of “dime bags” available for retail sales, and demand is a function of the numbers of users in the market.<sup>66</sup> Output is the drug money, which is useless to the FARC-EP unless it can be laundered or physically shipped back to Colombia. Traditionally, American counter drug efforts have focused primarily on reducing supply, while Colombia can only attack cocaine supply, as the demand for drugs in the United States or Europe is beyond Bogota’s ability to influence.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Arthur Fries et al., *The Price and Purity of Illegal Drugs: 1981–2007* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis, 2008), 4, B–6; Rydell and Everingham, *Controlling Cocaine: Supply and Demand Programs*, 55–59; Bonnie Dombrey-Moore, Susan Resetar, and Michael Childress, *A Systematic Description of the Cocaine Trade* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1994), 7–10.

<sup>66</sup> Rydell and Everingham, *Controlling Cocaine: Supply and Demand Programs*, 9.

<sup>67</sup> Washington Office on Latin America, *The U.S. Military and the War on Drugs in the Andes* (Washington, DC: Washington Office on Latin America, 1991), 6–7.

### *a. Production*

Coca production offers a tempting possible center of gravity. A kilo of processed cocaine can be concealed inside a human “mule,” a hectare of coca leaves is 10,000 square meters of crops that cannot move for the three months it takes before newly planted coca is ready for harvest, making coca fields appear a more vulnerable target than processed cocaine. Eradication, however, is not that easy. The land area of Colombia is 1,038,700 square kilometers, or 103,870,000 hectares. The 77,000 hectares estimated to be under coca cultivation represents less than one percent of Colombia’s territory, and most of it is located in the sparsely populated (and sparsely governed) southeastern part of the country. Additionally, coca farmers take steps to disguise their fields, intermingling coca plants with legitimate crops to discourage the government from spraying defoliates.<sup>68</sup> Coca cultivation is clearly vital for the production of cocaine, but how realistic is eradication?<sup>69</sup> Might there be another aspect in the production of cocaine that is easier to disrupt?

The next stage of cocaine production is processing coca leaves into coca paste, which is usually handled by the cartels and, increasingly, the BACRIMS. Since it takes approximately 100 kilos of leaves to make one kilo of paste, it is preferable to process the coca as close to its source as possible. Disrupting the initial processing of coca would force the cartels to ship coca leaves rather than more compact forms of the drug, and would have some negative impact on their profit margin. However, processing leaves into paste requires only a few simple ingredients, notably sodium carbonate and kerosene, that are readily available in grocery stores, and a small, plastic lined pit or 55-gallon drum. Paste labs can be easily concealed and quickly moved, making this a difficult stage to disrupt. While shipping coca paste is preferable to coca leaves, denying the cartels the ability to process coca leaves is impractical and would not lead to a collapse of the drug trade.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> U.S. Library of Congress, *Plan Colombia: A Progress Report*, 5–7.

<sup>69</sup> Kevin Jack Riley, *Snow Job: The Efficacy of Source Country Cocaine Policies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1993), 88.

<sup>70</sup> Grace Livingstone, *Inside Colombia: Drugs, Democracy and War* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 102.

The next step is to refine coca paste into cocaine base, a more difficult process than that of scraping coca leaves. It requires chemicals that are not found in grocery stores, such as sulfuric or hydrochloric acid, and potassium permanganate. These labs are larger and less mobile than paste producing sites, but are still relatively small and hard to detect. Since the paste is easier to transport than coca leaves, labs can be located further from the coca fields, and are often near airstrips to allow easy export of the product. While cocaine base is more compact than the paste, and can be transported, it is often refined onto finished cocaine, cocaine hydrochloride, at the same location. This stage is the most difficult, and the most dangerous. It requires skilled technicians and a more complex laboratory. While the second and third stage processing facilities may seem to be better targets than the first stage ones, they are by no means a center of gravity. During the 1980s much third stage cocaine processing was done in Mexico as cocaine paste is easy enough to transport out of the country for further refining. Disrupting the final processing of coca paste would prompt the cartels and BACRIMS to shift facilities outside Colombia, reducing but not eliminating the protection money paid to the FARC-EP.<sup>71</sup>

**b. Distribution**

Processing of coca leaves into cocaine is not a center of gravity, as the cartels could simple ship coca paste, or even the leaves, to external processing sites. Is distribution then the center of gravity for the Colombian drug trade? Interdiction certainly has appeal for both politicians and government agencies in the United States, if not as much in Colombia. Cocaine seizures look impressive when taken out of context; a pile of intercepted cocaine bales or a press release announcing the capture of 5 metric tons of cocaine indicates another victory in the War on Drugs, but how many drug shipments got through undetected that same day? Interdiction operations are “sexy” compared to eradication or crop substitution programs—no politician is going to pose for a photograph in a defoliated coca field! Because initiatives like the War on Drugs have translated into

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<sup>71</sup> Livingstone, *Inside Colombia: Drugs, Democracy and War*, 103.

increased funding for several U.S. agencies, the U.S. Coast Guard and the Drug Enforcement Agency have become advocates for interdiction.<sup>72</sup>

Despite its appeal, interdiction is a questionable tactic. It is estimated that 60% of cocaine shipments are intercepted by law enforcement agencies. While this is a questionable statistic, even assuming that it is accurate, the 5000 percent markup cocaine offers means that the 40% that does get through may easily compensate for any losses.<sup>73</sup> Trafficking takes many forms, from multi-ton shipments onboard private aircraft, “go-fast” offshore racing boats, and now submarines constructed in jungle estuaries, to multi-kilo packets concealed in commercial shipments, to cocaine-filled condoms that are smuggled internally by low-paid human mules. Regardless of the method, no individual shipment is vital to the FARC-EP’s finances. Theoretically, complete interdiction would put the FARC-EP out of the drug business, but that is not a realistic goal. As long as profits remain astronomical, the smugglers will find a method to get drugs into the United States.

*c. Money*

The Colombian narco-traffickers use the Black Market Peso Exchange (BPME) to launder drug money. Brokers in Colombia buy the dollars for pesos, while leaving the dollars in the United States. The brokers then use the American dollars to pay for American trade goods, which are imported to Colombia and sold for pesos. This system exploits a weakness in American financial oversight—manufacturers and distributors are not subject to the same anti-money laundering regulations that apply to banks. Since the early 2000s, the BPME system has shifted to include smuggling American dollars into Mexico, where looser financial regulations allow more flexibility, but with the same result. In both cases, the most vulnerable phase, when dirty money enters the legitimate financial system, takes place outside Colombia.<sup>74</sup> As with reducing

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<sup>72</sup> United States Coast Guard, *Fiscal Year 2008 U.S. Coast Guard Performance Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Coast Guard, 2009), 28.

<sup>73</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report 2011* (New York: United Nations, 2011), 107–112.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas R. Cook, “The Financial Arm of the FARC: A Threat Finance Perspective,” *Journal of Strategic Security* IV, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 29–30.

the demand for cocaine, there is little the Colombian Government can do to combat money laundering outside Colombia. Therefore, the Colombian Government must look elsewhere.

*d. Personnel*

Finally, personnel are a possible center of gravity, and one that the Colombian government can target. However, all the factors that eliminate personnel from being a center of gravity in Chapter II remain true. There is no shortage of individuals willing to take over for neutralized leaders, as demonstrated by the long list of drug lords killed or jailed by the Search Block, the PNC, the FBI, the DEA, and so forth. Lehder, Ochoa, Escobar, Rodriquez, Santacruz, all of them were among the most power men in the world, but the loss of none of them disrupted the drug trade for long. Likewise, the FARC-EP has suffered a string of leadership losses—Reyes, Vélez, Briceño, and Cano in recent years, yet continues to function. The potential to amass huge fortunes will attract replacement leaders regardless of how many are eliminated. The same holds true for foot soldiers, for whom the FARC-EP offers the prospect of social mobility in a stratified Colombian society. As long as producing drugs offers a better lifestyle, status and opportunity than their legal alternatives, there will be no shortage of recruits for the drug traffickers.

By process of elimination, the center of gravity for the FARC-EP as a criminal organization is the cultivation of coca leaves. Without coca, there can simply be no cocaine. Processing coca can be done in Colombia or outside the country, and trafficking the finished product can be done on land, by sea, or in the air, in freight shipments, or on human couriers. There are numerous methods to smuggle cocaine into the United States, and enough drugs will get through to pay for intercepted shipments. The Colombian government cannot decrease demand for cocaine in the United States or Europe, and killing individual drug lords only creates job openings. The only way the Colombian government can significantly reduce the FARC-EP's narcotics income is to reduce the amount of coca leaves available for processing into cocaine.

## **2. Critical Vulnerability**

Identifying coca supply as the FARC-EP's center of gravity suggests two possible critical vulnerabilities: eradication and crop substitution. Both aim to reduce the amount of coca cultivated; one through coercion, the other through cooperation. Plan Colombia emphasizes eradication, and U.S. officials proudly point out the number of hectares sprayed.<sup>75</sup> Crop substitution is not as impressive to report, and receives less attention. Can either approach effectively reduce the amount of coca cultivated in Colombia?

Coca eradication, like interdiction, is a highly visible function of the War on Drug that produces easy to report, impressive sounding statistics, but the actual details of eradication are far more mundane. Using aerial photography, coca fields are identified by measuring reflected light. Fields are then either sprayed with chemicals toxic to coca plants or destroyed by ground troops, manually burning or cutting the plants. Ground operations are dangerous, as coca fields are typically located in guerrilla strongholds, and can expect armed opposition. Spraying is quicker, but can be constrained by adjacent crops, villages, national parks, or other locations it would be inadvisable to douse in plant-killing chemicals. Additionally, aerial defoliation operations are not without their own risks, and the threat of ground fire forces sprayer aircraft to remain high, widely dispersing fumigants and increasing the likelihood of destroying adjacent legitimate crops. Beyond the tactical difficulty of eradicating a given coca field, identifying fields is a difficult task, given the nature of Colombia's geography.

Eradication has many detractors, for a variety of reasons. The environmental impact of destroying thousands of hectares of crops, possibly resulting in soil erosion, is one negative effect of eradication. Worse is the economic impact upon the *campesinos*, the very people the government is must win over in order to defeat the FARC-EP. Destroying an individual coca field has little impact on the FARC-EP, but can mean starvation for the *campesino* cultivating it. Beyond that, eradication has proven ineffective. At first glance, eradication efforts in Colombia have been successful. 44,158 hectares of coca plants were destroyed in 1999; 145,731 hectares in 2010, and the area

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<sup>75</sup> Office of National Drug Control Policy, *2011 National Drug Control Policy* (Washington, DC, 2011).

under cultivation has fallen from 160,100 hectares in 1999 to 62,000 hectares in 2010. Eradication efforts have increased by about 100,000 hectares, and production has fallen by about 100,000 hectares—success! Another 60,000 hectares and victory in the War on Drugs.<sup>76</sup>

Closer examination of the record of cocaine eradication reveals a less favorable interpretation. From 1999 to 2010, the Government of Colombia, with American assistance, has destroyed over 1,740,000 hectares of coca, or more than ten times the total amount of coca fields in Colombia in 1999, yet the *campesinos* continue to cultivate coca, albeit at reduced rates from the height of the 1980s.<sup>77</sup> Economics dictates that destroying coca fields reduces the supply of coca leaves, increasing the price of leaves, and incentivizing more *campesinos* to cultivate coca, ultimately restoring coca production to equilibrium. While individual farmers are hurt by eradication, overall it does not affect the drug trade.<sup>78</sup>

Likewise, crop substitution is a noble idea that cannot stand up to real-world economics. A number of factors, such as the poor infrastructure in the coca-growing areas of Colombia that make it difficult to ship produce to market, lower the value of non-coca crops in the area. Coca is the only crop where the buyer comes directly to the producer, alleviating the *campesino's* requirement to transport his crop to market. A hectare of coca is some 40 times more profitable than any other potential crop. Crop substitution means asking the *campesinos* to take a massive pay cut. Alone, there is no reason for them to voluntarily do so, which is why the eradication effort has some potential value. Currently, approximately one-half of coca fields are brought to harvest, so a *campesino* has a fifty percent chance of realizing 40 times more revenue than he would with legal crops. If the individual *campesino* perceives that the potential benefits of cultivating coca outweigh the risks of possible eradication, then he will grow coca. Theoretically, an effective eradication program would raise the risks to the point where cultivating coca was a bad investment, but such a program would also raise the price of

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<sup>76</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report 2011*, 99–100.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>78</sup> Riley, *Snow Job: The Efficacy of Source Country Cocaine Policies*, 88.

coca, increasing the potential payoff, and thus the acceptable risk. Such a cycle means that the Colombian *campesinos* will continue to grow coca as long as it is profitable.<sup>79</sup>

On closer examination, crop substitution does not actually require *campesinos* to plant legitimate crops. Rather, crop substitution really means job substitution, as the Colombian government must find employment for the *campesinos* other than growing coca. That can be cultivating coffee, or it can be working in an urban factory. The idea is not to increase the amount of legitimate crops grown in Colombia, but to reduce the economic incentive to grow coca. Colombian *campesinos* do not grow coca because they love working the land, but because it is their best option to earn income. In fact, many coca growers are urban immigrants unable to find gainful employment in the cities. Crop substitution limits them to farmers, regardless of what they are growing. As nations develop, a smaller percentage of their workers are employed in agriculture, and as Colombia develops economically, less of its people will work on its farms. Colombia must approach it as a job substitution problem, not crop substitution.

Ultimately, basic economics determines the FARC-EP's critical vulnerability. The price of coca leaves remains low because of abundant labor. If the *campesinos* find more lucrative employment elsewhere, they will stop cultivating coca. The FARC-EP can always raise the price of coca leaves to encourage its cultivation, but doing so cuts into their profit margin. As 200 kilos of coca leaves are required to produce one kilo of cocaine, an increase in coca price reduces profits by 200 times the increase. Currently, cultivating coca leaves is so much more profitable than any other crop that crop substitution is unlikely to work, regardless of the pressures of eradication. The supply of coca cannot be forcibly reduced, but farmers can be lured away into higher paying jobs.

The low cost of food in the United States would seem to invalidate this strategy, but that is not the case. American farms produce low cost product despite the availability of high paying jobs in other sectors, but this is due to mechanization, which in turn is facilitated by economies of scale. Agricultural machinery represents large capital outlays, and only large farms can afford million dollar combines. Illicit coca fields must remain

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<sup>79</sup> Livingston, *Inside Colombia: Drugs, Democracy and War*, 100; Riley, *Snow Job: The Efficacy of Source Country Cocaine Policies*, 97–98.

small to avoid detection, so modern mechanized agricultural methods cannot be applied to coca production. Agricultural goods in the United States are cheap because of technology, not low wages. Coca leaves are cheap because of low wages in Colombia. Thus, the FARC-EP's critical vulnerability is Colombia's economy. Improving the economic situation of the *campesinos* will hurt the FARC-EP. The problem is conceiving a viable way to do this.<sup>80</sup>

### 3. Metrics

Assuming the FARC-EP's critical vulnerability is the poverty of the *campesinos* it relies on for cheap coca leaves introduces a set of metrics alien to many soldiers, such as Gini coefficient,<sup>81</sup> as well as more familiar ones, such as GDP growth rate. Increasing Colombia's GDP alone simply means the rich are getting richer while the *campesinos* remain poor. Decreasing the Gini coefficient means more economic equality, but does that mean the poor are getting richer, or the rich are getting poorer? While these metrics are vital indicators of Colombia's economic health, they do not directly reflect the state of the drug trade. The Gini coefficient could be decreasing because the *campesinos* are getting a better price for their coca leaves, or they are selling more leaves, neither of which helps counter-narcotics efforts. Likewise, an increase in Colombia's GDP could simply mean the drug traffickers have found better ways to launder money and then recycle it in the legal Colombian economy.

While improving Colombia's economy is vital to reducing the supply of cocaine, that supply must be directly measured to get a feel for the status of the War on Drugs. The illicit nature of the drug trade contradicts any attempts to measure the supply of cocaine. The best metric would be the amount of cocaine smuggled into the United States, but that number is impossible to determine accurately. Various agencies and organizations release statistics estimating the amount of drugs that enter the United States and Europe undetected, but those numbers are inaccurate and potentially biased based on

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<sup>80</sup> Dwight H. Perkins et al., *The Economics of Development* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2001), 595–600.

<sup>81</sup> The Gini coefficient is a measure of income inequality; with 0 being perfect equality and 1 perfect inequality. Colombia's .56 in 2010 ranked it as the 11th highest, or most unequal, in the world. Ibid., 120; Central Intelligence Agency, "CIA World Factbook," (n.d.), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

the nature of the reporting organization. An agency charged with stopping the flow of cocaine, such as the DEA, will naturally estimate low, and will attempt to show a downward trend. It is unlikely that the FARC-EP will challenge the DEA's estimate. Conversely, a drug legalization group may estimate high, to demonstrate the futility of outlawing narcotics. Absent capturing the FARC-EP's ledger, such numbers are useless.

Likewise, intercepted drug shipments make for good press releases, but offer little insight into the progress of the War on Drugs. An increase in the amount of shipments stopped by law enforcement can mean that fewer less drugs are getting through, or that more drugs are being shipped, increasing the chance of interception. Likewise, a lack of intercepted shipments may mean that the smugglers have a new, unknown method to disguise their drugs, or there are less drugs being shipped. Without knowing the total amount of drugs being trafficked, interdiction numbers are meaningless.

As discussed in the eradication section, area under coca cultivation might be a useful metric, but suffers the same failing as the estimates of total drug supply. The *campesinos* attempt to hide their coca fields, which casts doubts onto the accuracy of estimation attempts. Again, such a metric would be useful if it were possible to measure accurately.

Lastly, the street price for a retail dose of cocaine or crack cocaine is probably the best metric available to gauge progress in combating narcotics. Still, while the best measure available, it is an imperfect tool. Price is a factor of both supply and demand, so an increase in street price may indicate success, as the supply of cocaine is decreasing, or it may indicate more users, not the sought-after goal. A decline in price works in a similar fashion. Moreover, the supply-demand curve for cocaine is unresponsive for several reasons. Crack cocaine is usually retailed at set amounts, such as ten dollar doses, hence "dime bags." Due to their illegal nature, retail drug deals are hurried affairs, without the opportunity to evaluate the product being purchased or to make change. Street dealers can fiddle with purity to some extent, but even they do not know the exact composition of what they are selling. Due to its addictive nature, demand for crack cocaine is largely independent of price, while freebase, usually seen as an upper-class drug, can be a

prestige good, where demand actually increases as price increases. The street value of cocaine is an imperfect metric, but the best one available to measure the supply of cocaine in the market.<sup>82</sup>

### C. CONCLUSION

Analysis of the FARC-EP as a narco-criminal group indicates that their supply of coca leaves to process into cocaine is their center of gravity. Without coca, the FARC-EP would become solely an ideological revolutionary group, and an unpopular and ill-funded one. As long as there are coca leaves, and a market for cocaine, the FARC-EP will exist in some form, be it drug-dealing revolutionaries or simply narco-criminals. Further analysis demonstrates that the critical vulnerability that best attacks this center of gravity is the economic conditions that make cultivating coca attractive to the *campesinos* of Colombia. The farmers act in their own self-interest to maximize personal profit, and eradication efforts alone defy the law of supply and demand. The more hectares of coca are destroyed, the higher the price of coca, which in turn encourages more coca cultivation.

Coca cultivation cannot be stopped through coercive measures alone, but must be discouraged through a comprehensive economic development plan that offers alternative sources of income to would-be growers. This focus on economic development to defeat the FARC-EP's cocaine trafficking suggests economic metrics to measure progress, but to use such metrics is to commit the same mistake the British Admiralty did 80 years ago, that of confusing one possible strategy with the desired end state. The Colombian Government's ultimate objective is to reduce the amount of narcotics being trafficked. Crop substitution is but one approach to this, as sinking U-Boats is only one method to ensure sufficient supplies cross the Atlantic. As the Colombian Government cannot influence cocaine demand, it must reduce supply, and the best metric to reliably measure cocaine supply is street price, assuming inelastic demand. Measuring the price of cocaine

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<sup>82</sup> Jonathan P. Caulkins, *Developing Price Series for Cocaine* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1994), 44–45.

in the United States may seem like an indirect way to assess the fight against the FARC-EP in Colombia, but it is the metric that best reflects the nature of the problem and its solution.

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## IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### A. CONCLUSIONS

Net assessment shows the FARC-EP is fundamentally an ideological group despite their involvement in cocaine production and trafficking. They have consistently pursued their ideological goals, even to the degree of hurting their narcotics revenue. Had their primary motivation been amassing drug fortunes, they would not have threatened the existence of the state of Colombia, and they would have attracted less attention from the United States, attention that has translated into Plan Colombia and the nadir if not demise of the FARC-EP. The *Despeje* would have represented complete victory for the FARC-EP had they been a narco-criminal organization. 16,200 square miles would easily hide the entire annual coca production of Colombia, and did allow the FARC-EP ample space to produce cocaine during the Pastrana peace process. However, the FARC-EP was not content with control of a mere fraction of the country, and viewed the *Despeje* as a sanctuary from which to expand their control. In February 2002, they hijacked an aircraft, kidnapped Colombian Senator Jorge Eduardo Gechem Turbay and conducted a series of urban bombings.<sup>83</sup> As a result of their continued revolutionary activities, President Pastrana called off the peace talks and ordered the ENC to retake the *Despeje*. As narco-criminals, this was a major miscalculation. As ideological guerillas, continued operations from their safe haven were the only way eventually to overthrow the Government of Colombia.

Plan Colombia was envisioned by then-President Andrés Pastrana Arango as a “Marshall Plan for Colombia,”<sup>84</sup> asking the United States for help with social and economic reforms to undermine the population’s support for the FARC-EP. Washington chose instead to emphasize the counter-narcotic aspects of the plan, devoting more than 60% of aid to military instead of developmental projects.<sup>85</sup> At first, the impact was questionable, but continued net assessment shows that Plan Colombia and Colombia’s

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<sup>83</sup> The Economist, “The Americas: A Call to Arms; Colombia’s Conflicts,” 362, no. 8262 (March 2002): 36–37.

<sup>84</sup> Spencer et al., *Colombia’s Road to Recovery: Security and Governance 1982–2010*, 39.

<sup>85</sup> U.S. Library of Congress, *Plan Colombia: A Progress Report*, 2.

own *Plan Patriota* have resulted in a dramatic reversal in the FARC-EP's fortunes. The Colombia Army has taken the fight to the FARC-EP, disrupting FARC-EP base areas, killing multiple high level leaders, and reducing the total amount of coca produced, attacking both the insurgency and the drug trade.<sup>86</sup>

## 1. Counter Insurgency Metrics

The ENC's battlefield successes have translated into improved security in many regions. Both the Colombian government and military are happy to broadcast metrics, such as a decrease in political assassinations,<sup>87</sup> kidnappings,<sup>88</sup> and defections.<sup>89</sup> While all of these potential indication a weakened FARC-EP, they do not address the FARC-EP' center of gravity—its support, either voluntary or coerced. In fact, a decrease in kidnappings and extortion may actually be indicative of greater *campesino* support for the FARC-EP. As coca protection profits rise, they could afford to scale back their other illegal activities, which are more damaging to public opinion.

A reduction in FARC-EP coerced support might be manifested by increased support for the Colombian Government, especially in terms of cooperation with local police and military units. As the locals in a given region feel less threatened by the FARC-EP, they are more likely to provide intelligence on the FARC-EP. This can be directly measured by the number of tips received. The number of valid tips received from the local population may be the best way to measure whom the population supports, or at least respects the most.

Those *campesinos* involved in coca cultivation are less likely to provide the government intelligence or cooperation, even if they no longer support the FARC-EP. Instead, a loss of voluntary support for the FARC-EP will be harder to measure. Over the long run, it can be expected to manifest itself in reduced FARC-EP operating capabilities. As the FARC-EP does not publish its annual budget, there may be no easy way to

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<sup>86</sup> Spencer et al., *Colombia's Road to Recovery: Security and Governance 1982–2010*, 67.

<sup>87</sup> Colombian Ministry of Defense, *Amenaza contra la Democracia 2001–2009*, March 2009.

<sup>88</sup> Colombian Ministry of Defense, *Comportamiento Secuestros Extorsivos 1998–2009*, March 2010.

<sup>89</sup> Colombian Ministry of Defense, *Programa de Desmovilizacion: Desmovilizados Individuales 2002–2006*, July 7, 2006.

measure a decrease in financial support. Captured documents, such as the “FARC Files” and defector interviews may offer periodic snapshots, but cannot be relied on for regular updates. Only continuous, rigorous net assessment can take into account all of the above factors and determine if the desired end state is being achieved.

## **2. Counter Narcotics Metrics**

The center of gravity of the narcotics trade is the willingness of the *campesinos* to cultivate coca. Directly measuring this is not possible, as the best metric would be the price of coca leaves. However, this cannot be accurately tracked by government forces, as few people will openly admit to illegal activity. Tracking prices at other stages in the drug trade, while equally as difficult, are less reflective of the supply of coca and more reflective of the success of counter-drug operations, such as interdiction.

If it is not possible to accurately measure the price of coca leaves, other metrics must be employed, such as measuring the legal economy of Colombia. If coca cultivators were induced to shift production to legal crops, the supply of coca would decrease. This shift would manifest itself as an increase in yields of coffee, bananas, corn, and other crops. This is not perfect, as increased legal crop yields could be the result of increased efficiency, more acres under cultivation, or urban workers migrating to the countryside to find work, rather than a shift from illegal to legal cultivation. Additionally, an increase in other employment, such as factory workers or service sector workers, could drain labor from the countryside, decreasing the amount of *campesinos* available to cultivate coca.

The long-term method to reduce the supply of coca is to offer more attractive legal employment. This means growing Colombia’s economy in a manner that provides for better paying jobs. This can be tracked by measures, such as Gini coefficients, exports, and GDP.

In the short, a reduction in the supply of coca will reduce the amount of money the FARC-EP receives, both as there will be less *campesinos* who need to pay the FARC-EP for protection, and as an increase in the price of coca leaves will cut into the profit margin of those FARC-EP blocks that do engage in cocaine production. This too can be

tracked by captured files and defector interviews. Again, proper net assessment is necessary to account for all the variables, make reasonable estimations of impossible to determine statistics, and recommend the proper way ahead.

### 3. Victory

It is premature in 2012 to rule the FARC-EP finished. The FARC-EP has been active since 1964, and even a 50% reduction in manpower or drug income would leave it with a sizeable army and war chest. They are just as capable of conducting net assessments as the ENC, and responded to *Plan Patriota* with *Plan Resistencia*, which called for the FARC-EP to disappear into remote areas or urban barrios. There are vast amounts of uninhabited jungle in Colombia, and in theory, the FARC-EP could survive with the support of those involved in coca production.

Despite *Plan Resistencia*, the FARC-EP suffered badly at the hands of the ENC, leading them to *Plan Renacer*, calling for a shift to an urban guerrilla campaign,<sup>90</sup> which may have mixed results. Rumors that it plans to launch urban campaigns periodically surface in Colombia. However, the FARC-EP is ideologically and historically a rural movement whose flirtations with urban campaigns are usually short lived, not the least because to abandon their rural enclaves would sever them from their primary source of support and income.

Absent gaining true popular support, the FARC-EP will have to continue to finance itself by criminal activities. There is already growing popular dissatisfaction with the FARC-EP's violent acts, as demonstrated by the February 4, 2008 rallies calling for the liberation of hundreds of hostages, with participation estimated between hundreds of thousands and several million people worldwide.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, a former ally, called for them to disarm and work towards political reforms peacefully, although he has failed to back this up by disarming their camps on the Colombian/Venezuelan border.

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<sup>90</sup> Sibylla Brodzinsky, "In Strategic Shift, Colombia's FARC Targets Cities," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 17, 2009, 6.

<sup>91</sup> David Kirkpatrick, "Does Facebook Have a Foreign Policy?" *Foreign Policy*, December 19, 2011, 55.

Victory in the fight against the FARC-EP is a relative term. The FARC-EP has survived for almost fifty years and will likely survive in some form for the foreseeable future. However, the FARC-EP does not currently offer a credible threat to the existence of the state of Colombia, and it is hard to imagine a realist path for them to replace the state in the near future. The Colombian Government must capitalize on its success; and continue to improve its governance and its armed forces. To absolutely defeat the FARC-EP will require immense economic and social change. Even still, as long as there is a global market for illegal narcotics, there will be coca cultivation and the associated armed groups in the rural areas of Colombia, just as there are marijuana fields in remote regions of the United States.

## **B. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Colombian Government has made notable progress in its fight against the FARC-EP, but it cannot afford to rest on its laurels. Having significantly weakened the FARC-EP, it must conduct a fresh net assessment, to determine if the nature of the conflict, and the enemy, has remained the same, or if a shift in strategy is necessary. Successfully attacking a center of gravity may result in a new center of gravity emerging, such as the emergence of the Cali Cartel as the leading Colombian drug cartel following the Colombian Government's successes against the Medellín Cartel. Likewise, a successful campaign against the FARC-EP's drug funding may precipitate an increase in kidnappings, roadblocks, or other illegal revenue operations, which may potentially be more damaging to Colombian civilian society.

### **1. Military Improvements**

Not only should the Colombian government attack the centers of gravities identified in this thesis, it should continue to improve the capabilities of its armed forces, following the successful counterinsurgency strategy it has implemented. It should continue to increase the professionalism of its service members, emphasizing the importance of human rights and the rule of law, in order to increase its popular support. This will allow it to better identify and isolate guerrillas from the civilian population. It should continue to develop small unit leaders, air and riverine mobility, and close air

support, so that it can better destroy FARC-EP units once they have been identified. This will result in fewer friendly and civilian casualties, increasing troop morale and further improving the legitimacy of the Colombian Armed Forces and thus the Colombian State. Increasing the presence, quality, and legitimacy of the Colombian Government will help ensure that a potentially defeated FARC-EP is not replaced by another insurgent group. Rather, the Colombian state would occupy the space vacated by the FARC-EP.

## **2. Economic Improvements**

Few insurgencies can be defeated by a purely military strategy. There are underlying social and economic problems in Colombia that have contributed to the FARC-EP's longevity and successes, as evidenced by the degree of popular support they enjoy despite the hardships they have inflicted on the citizens of Colombia. Even if the Colombian Government were to utterly annihilate the FARC-EP, failure to address the root causes of the Colombian insurgencies will only result in future insurgencies. Not only should net assessment be used to assess the military dimensions of an insurgency, but it should examine all dimensions of the conflict. In the case of Colombia, economic inequities, poorly defined land titles, government corruption, and weak local governments have contributed as much if not more to the FARC-EP's cause than guns and drugs.

Significant land reform and economic improvement will satisfy the demands of some insurgents and some sympathizers, reducing the FARC-EP's strength and possibly opening up internal schisms. Giving the *campesinos* clear title to their land will give them a stake in society and in the current Colombian Government, making them more resistant to insurgent recruitment. Improving the economic conditions of Colombia will offer the citizens employment that is more attractive than cultivating coca, whether that is farming legitimate crops, manufacturing, or other legal employment. Reducing the relative attractiveness of cultivating coca will drive the price of coca leaves up, which will limit the FARC-EP's revenue flow, as well as positively impact the general culture of lawlessness prevalent in some areas of Colombia.

### **3. Demilitarization of Government Functions**

The Colombian Government must capitalize on the legitimacy it does enjoy, especially in regions where well-trained troops are seen as honest, impartial actors. It is not sufficient that the ENC is seen as legitimate; the Colombian Government must gradually replace its domestic military presence with civilian agencies. Granted, many Latin American countries have a tradition of domestic military operations, where the Army is often the only government presence in large portions of the country. Regardless of the skill or efficiency of the ENC, relying on it for basic civic functions, such as teaching school, is indicative of government weakness. Replacing soldiers with civilians not only demonstrates improvements in security and governance; it also frees up soldiers to further increase the pressure on remaining FARC-EP fronts.

### **4. Ending the Conflict**

As the Colombian Government enjoys increasing success against the FARC-EP, it should plan for the endgame, such as the 2012-peace process. Any negotiation requires concessions from both sides. The Colombian Government must use net assessment to yield on points that will weaken the FARC-EP, and refuse to concede on issues that may strengthen the FARC-EP. “Conceding” on land reform issues will actually strengthen the Government by addressing one of the principle grievances contributing to the FARC-EP’s popularity. However, ceding large swaths of territory, such as the *Despeje*, to guerrilla control strengthen the insurgencies and must be avoided. While the *Despeje* may have been a necessary delaying tactic in 1998, the Colombian Government is in a much stronger position in 2012, and can afford to dictate terms more favorable to the state.

The Colombian Government should now move to terminate the decades-long struggle with the FARC-EP through both negotiations and continued military pressure. Negotiations will demobilize the more moderate FARC-EP members, but there will always be a small group of hardcore true believers who will settle for nothing less than the destruction and replacement of the Colombian state. These diehards must be dealt with kinetically, or so marginalized that they are reduced to isolated fugitives, unable to challenge the Colombian Government. As negotiations progress, as more insurgents quit the fight, the pressure to demobilize on the remaining guerrillas will increase, due to the

bandwagon effect. Additionally, defecting guerrillas will provide the government with intelligence, further exposing the remaining cadres to kinetic solutions. Continuous net assessment will indicate when this begins to happen, allowing the Colombian Government to follow through and ensure a favorable outcome to the FARC-EP-led insurgency.

## **5. Post FARC-EP**

Destruction of the FARC-EP will not result in the termination of the Colombian drug trade. Already, the BACRIMS are assuming a greater share of the drug trade. However, some of the strategies necessary to defeat the FARC-EP, such as increasing the presence and legitimacy of the Colombian Government, and creating economic opportunity for the *campesinos* are just as necessary and useful in countering the illegal narcotics trade. Many of the same metrics that show progress against the FARC-EP can be used to track progress against non-political narco-traffickers, such as the willingness of the population to cultivate coca.

## **6. Continuous Net Assessment**

Reliance on a single metric, or even a single set of metrics, is wrong. Even if the metric being used accurately reflects progress in a desired direction, there may be unintended consequences, unforeseen second and third order effects that make the situation worse. A simple historical example would be the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor—they successfully disabled the American battleship fleet, drastically reducing the U.S. Navy’s strength on paper. However, this forced American naval focus to shift to aircraft carriers, a technologically superior weapon, as their only remaining capital ships. It could be argued that the center of gravity of the U.S. Navy on December 6, 1941, was its 15 dreadnought battleships, and by December 8, 1941, its center of gravity had become its seven aircraft carriers. Likewise, the Colombian government must be careful that, in weakening one aspect of the FARC-EP, it does not unintentionally aid the guerrillas, or create space for another illegal organization to flourish.

Properly applied net assessment can be vital to victory in the entire range of warfare, from counterinsurgency to global state-on-state warfare. Improperly applied net assessment, incorrectly identified centers of gravity, and misleading metrics are a recipe for possible defeat. U.S. military planners should use a rigorous net assessment procedure to determine the nature of potential future conflicts, and measure U.S. plans against projected enemy responses to predict expected second and third order effects. However, it is not sufficient to apply net assessment *ante bellum*. Rather, net assessment must be a continuous process during all phases of conflict. Additionally, military leaders should be ready to change strategies if conclusions so indicate. Changing strategies is not necessarily an indication of past failure—it may simply indicate the need to evolve along with an evolving enemy. Perhaps the worse failure a military leader can commit is to ignore the results of net assessment, and squander time, resources, and lives pursuing the wrong strategy. Metrics can be seductive, and the evolving nature of all armed conflict means that even the best metrics can lose their relevance or become deceptive as campaigns progress. Only continual net assessment allows commanders to maintain an accurate view of a conflict, and remain on the path to victory.

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